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**THE LEAGUE
OF THE SIGNET RING**

THE LEAGUE OF THE SIGNET RING

BY

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Author of "Elinor Arden, Royalist," "The Lass of the Silver Sword," etc

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

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NOTE.—In the story of Catherine, told in Chapter II, the author has by the courtesy of The Churchman Company made use of the material on which she founded "A Captive Choir," published in *The Churchman* in 1905.

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CHAPTER I

WYNDGARTH

“**W**HAT a dear old house! It looks as if it were full of mysteries and legends and secret staircases and all sorts of fascinating things!”

The twentieth-century motor-car had turned in at the gateway of the eighteenth-century homestead; and Jean Lennox, who had been riding backwards, was now standing up, at the risk of toppling over, that she might face forward and see the old colonial home in all its antique glory.

It was Easter Monday, and a few minutes before, the lady of the mansion and a round dozen of young people in the highest spirits had arrived at the Tallulah station on their way to hold a house-party at the Armstrongs' country seat, Wyndgarth, on the banks of the Hudson.

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Mrs. Armstrong and the girls, spinning along in the automobile, had left the boys in the carriage far behind; and here they were stopping already before the stately brick dwelling, with its gabled roof and dormer-windows, its pillared porch and quaint colonial doorway.

The group that alighted from the motor-car consisted of the gracious, winning hostess, her daughter Carol in all the lovely bloom of her nineteen years, and seven boarding-school maidens out on their Easter vacation: Jean Lennox and her cousin Evelyn Sherwood, Cecily Brook, Betty Randolph, Hilda Hastings, Phyllis Morton and merry little Frances Browne.

"The first President of the United States was entertained here once," said Mrs. Armstrong. "And now we have the pleasure of receiving a queen and her maids of honor. Welcome to Wyndgarth!"

The queen and her maids of honor, as she merrily called her guests, belonged to a sisterhood worthy of the days of chivalry. A year ago Jean, then a Freshman at Hazelhurst Hall, had banded her classmates together into the Order of the Silver Sword. This society had a distinctly military flavor. The members called themselves Battle Maids, and their badges were miniature golden shields crossed by silver swords. *Caritas et Veritas* was the motto on

the badges, for these girl knights had armed themselves with two mystic weapons,—Caritas, the silver sword of love and kind-heartedness, and Veritas, the golden shield of truth, honor and loyalty.

Jean herself had been elected queen of the Order, and Cecily and Betty respectively the princesses of the Scroll and of the Treasure, secretary and treasurer being titles too modern by far. As for Carol, then president of the seniors, having adopted freshman Jean as a younger sister, she was destined to become her majesty's councillor of state, the Alruna of the Silver Sword.

Carol's school days were over now, yet no important ceremony was deemed complete unless she came out to Hazelhurst Hall to be present; and this Easter-tide Frances and Betty, Hilda and Phyllis, who lived too far away to go home, had been invited to spend the vacation with their Alruna in New York, while Cecily and Evelyn visited the Queen. To-day Carol and her guests, and Jean and hers, had joined forces, and the merry-making at Wyndgarth was to crown the Springtime holidays.

"Oh, look at the date on the corner-stone!" exclaimed Hilda. "1759! What an old, old house it is!"

"Does n't it seem as if George Washington ought to be on the porch making a bow to us?"

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said Carol. Scarcely had she said the words when the door flew open, but no dignified gentleman with powdered hair and knee-breeches stepped out to welcome them. Instead, they heard a rush like an avalanche: a huge dark body hurled itself through the doorway, and a monstrous creature came bounding forth to meet the invaders of this domain.

Evelyn and Phyllis, who were directly in the monster's path, jumped aside in the nick of time, and Betty took refuge in the automobile, for the creature looked to her startled eyes as big as a lion. The defender of the house was, in fact, the largest dog the girls had ever seen, and his bark was nearly as deafening as a lion's roar. Yet it was not for the strangers but for Carol that the great dog sprang. She braced herself against a pillar not a second too soon. He bounded upon her with a force that would have thrown her down but for the support of the column. She met the onslaught by throwing her arms around his neck and laughing at his boisterous affection.

"Hamlet, you dear old fellow! Was he so glad to see his family he wanted to knock them down! Was he so lonely he didn't know what to do with his great big self! Master's coming, old boy. He'll be here in a few minutes. Oh, Aggie, how do you do?" She waved her hand

over the dog's head to the grayhaired woman who had opened the door, and with whom her mother was exchanging a greeting.

"Really, Carol," said Mrs. Armstrong, "Hamlet's getting altogether too unmanageable. We shall soon have people afraid to come to the house."

But Jean, Cecily, and Frances were already fondling Carol's turbulent welcomer, and soon eight pairs of hands were busy petting the canine giant.

"His name's Hamlet, is n't it?" said Hilda.

"Yes," replied Carol, "because he's a Great Dane. He's decidedly mad, too. I don't mean rabid, but he has a tendency to insanity, like the Prince of Denmark. He gets hallucinations and thinks he's a little fuzzy white poodle, just the right size to cuddle down in your lap, and *then* he's slightly inconvenient! We thought he needed country air to cool his heated brain. Poor old giant, he does hate the city so!"

"Now, girls," said Mrs. Armstrong, "leave the Prince of Denmark to calm down, and come and see what cosy homes people used to live in. Aggie, you never saw so large a family in this place before, did you? And we're not all here yet. Jean, Aggie has been extremely anxious to see you and Douglas. She and Andrew, the

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coachman, are from Scotland. They were delighted when we told them we were going to have a Scotch lassie and laddie here."

The old servant approvingly surveyed the tall slight girl of fifteen, with the dark hair and the deep blue eyes. "Ah!" said she, "I see the Hieland look in her bonny face! It's a sight for sair een, as they say in Scotland."

"My father lived in Scotland when he was a boy," said Jean, smiling in response, "and he's going to take me there to visit his old home, some day."

Whatever Scotch homes might be like, Jean was not long in deciding that old colonial ones were the ideal places in which to live. The girls were ushered first into the large square hall, and very hospitable it looked, with its open fireplace where the logs were ablaze on the tall brass andirons. Next they were led into the drawing-room where they saw massive mahogany furniture with legs carved into eagles' claws, fine old mirrors in heavy gilded frames, and, above the high-panelled wainscoting, the quaintest of wall-paper, depicting in colors grown faint with age simpering dames and gracefully posing gallants.

"I'm so fascinated with those fine ladies, with their wasp waists and skirts like great balloons, I can't tear my eyes away from them!" declared Phyllis.

"But you *must*," said Cecily. "Do look at this little love of a piano—or—what is it anyway? The great-grandmother of our pianos, I should think!"

"That 's just what it is," said Carol. "It 's a harpsichord." She opened the antique instrument, adorned with gilding and painted nymphs, and played *Amaryllis*, drawing soft, tinkling music from the keys yellow with age.

Then came a visit to the library, with its high cases of ancient, leather-bound books.

"Look at the bookworm, with her nose in a Shakspeare already!" laughed Betty, as her Queen became oblivious to all else in pouring over a big brown volume. "Jean Lennox, I believe you 'd read the dictionary through if you couldn 't find anything better!"

" 'How fweet the moonlight fleeps upon this bank!
Here will we fit, and let the founds of mufic
Creep in our ears;' "

responded Jean. "It 's no joke trying to read this, with the funny long 's's' looking just like 'f's.'"

The bookworm laid down the Bard of Avon at a cry from her cousin. "Girls, they used to have cows in New York, way down town!" Evelyn was standing laughing before a large engraving which displayed a bit of the city's crowded business section as it had appeared in

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the end of the eighteenth century. She read aloud the inscription beneath it, “ ‘Government House on Bowling Green. 1798.’ Look, girls, the government house has a yard and a regular farm fence! And two cows asleep in front of the steps! Think of that in bustling New York!”

“Imagine business men hurrying to their offices and stumbling over nice old *bossies!*” said Carol. “Safer than stumbling under autos, I must say!” She opened a drawer of the secretary, and taking out a letter yellow with time handed it to Evelyn. “What do you think of this for a fashionable New York address?” she asked. And Evelyn read out:

Dr. Philip Armstrong,
Near Tea-water Pump,
New York!

“Tea-water Pump!” exclaimed the company. “What does it mean?”

“It means the pump where the fashionable ladies of the neighborhood had their kettles filled when they wanted to make tea,” explained Carol. “It was such good clear water, I suppose. Old great-great-grand-uncle Philip lived near the pump, and that was his address. There was no danger of *his* mail going to the dead letter office, was there? Oh, Mother,

wouldn't it be funny if whenever you gave a tea you sent me out to the public pump to fill the kettle! Now, girls, come into the dining-room and I'll introduce you to some nice old ladies and gentlemen."

In the dining-room red-coated horsemen hunted foxes all over the wall-paper, and out from their antique frames looked ladies with mountainous, powdered coiffures, or imposing turbans, and gentlemen with the ruffles and gay costumes of colonial days. From the dining-room they passed into the kitchen—not the one in present use, but "the old kitchen," from which dinner had been served to General Washington. Here was a huge open fireplace, with a crane. It had ovens in its walls, and its chimney-corners were so hospitably capacious that two cronies could have drawn up their chairs in the ingle-nook and chatted quite comfortably across the blaze.

Finally they ascended the wide staircase, past the tall clock ticking its "forever—never" on the landing, to the floor above, where they were shown into a large bedroom.

"My senses!" cried Frances. "What an enormous bed! They must have been giants in those days! And if there isn't a step-ladder to climb into it by!"

"This is the room that Washington slept in,"

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said Mrs. Armstrong. "It is now assigned to the Queen of the Silver Sword and the Princess of the Scroll."

While Jean was admiring the shepherds and shepherdesses on the wall-paper, and Cecily was trying to work the spinning-wheel in the corner, the other girls were shown their rooms and found themselves likewise provided with four-post beds of monster size, each with its flight of steps. Frances had just successfully scaled her ladder when the sound of the carriage was heard.

Carol turned to the Great Dane who had kept close at her side during the tour of the house. "Hamlet, there's Alan!" Away darted the dog to meet his master. They could hear the rush of the avalanche descending the staircase. Hats and coats laid aside, the girls turned to follow and at the top of the flight encountered the rest of the house-party, two of Carol's trio of brothers, and their four boy guests. In the lead was Alan Armstrong, a handsome fellow of seventeen years. After him came his friends, Dick Bradley and Ned Conyngham; then Cecily's cousin, Jack Hamilton, and Douglas Gordon, both sixteen. Jack was sturdy of frame and jolly of countenance. Douglas was a fair-haired Scotch lad, his face clean-cut and strong, with a fearless frank-

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ness about it, and his gray eyes as honest as they were clear and keen. Bringing up the rear with Hamlet was the youngest Armstrong, fourteen-year-old Eric, tawny-haired, merry-eyed, with fine rosy cheeks which were a source of pride to his mother and of deep disgust to himself.

“This is an awfully jolly place, Carol!” said Douglas.

“I should think you ’d live here all the year round,” said Jack.

“We only came into the property about a year ago, but we mean to make it our summer home,” answered Carol. “We used to have the most glorious times out here, visiting Grandfather when we were children. We thought there was no place like it in the world—and I believe I think so still.”

There was no time for further exploration just then, for luncheon was announced, and a long automobile ride was the program for the afternoon.

“Jean, do you know what I keep thinking about all the time, this vacation?” said Douglas, when the young folks were gathered on the porch after luncheon. “It ’s the difference between last Easter and this. Last year, there I was, all alone in the world trying to find work, and nobody to care a cent what happened to

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me! And now, look at the change! I tell you I can't believe I'm the same fellow, sometimes!"

"And wouldn't I have been surprised," said Jean, "if anybody had told me last Easter I was going to have a great big brother like you!"

It was indeed hard, at times, for Douglas Gordon to realize that he was the very boy who, the year before, had been left to fight his way in the world, unfriended and alone. His mother he could scarcely remember. His father, a physician, had been forced through ill-health to give up his city practice and go with his little son to live in the Adirondacks. More than a year ago he had been taken down with pneumonia and had died on Christmas Day. The boy, left destitute, had faced his sorrow manfully, and had set forth resolutely to seek his fortune. Looking for work he had come to Halcyon Lake. Soon afterwards a number of Hazelhurst girls had arrived at Halcyon also, to spend the summer at a camp belonging to Cecily's mother.

Among them was the leader of the battle maids with the good sword Caritas. Jean and Douglas had met, her girlish sympathy had soon won from the lad his whole story, and the young Queen had drawn her silver sword in his behalf. Through her pleading he had obtained the place of boatman at the Brooks' camp, and

between the boy and girl a fast friendship had sprung up. Before the vacation was over Douglas had had a chance to prove his metal, and had showed himself to be of such brave, good stuff, that when Mr. Lennox had come to see his little daughter he had made up his mind that here was a lad of whom any father might well be proud. And when it was found that, years ago in Scotland, Douglas's grandfather and Jean's had been close friends, loving each other like brothers, it had seemed to Mr. Lennox that the boy had a strong claim upon him. So he had taken Douglas into his own home, determined to give him an education which should fit him for whatever work he might choose in life. A father, a mother, a sister, and the happiest of homes—all these had come at once to the lonely boy. He longed again and again to be able, some time, to repay his benefactors. He had thrown himself with a will into his work at the boarding-school to which he was sent. At least he could show that their trust in him had not been misplaced. Alan and Eric Armstrong were among his schoolmates.

"Come down to the stable while we're waiting for the autos, Gordon, and see my Aire-dale," begged Eric, coming up to Douglas and Jean.

"All right, kid," assented the older boy. "Come along, Jean, don't you want to?"

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“Yes, I love dogs,” said Jean, the ever-ready. “You come, too, Cecily. Come, Evelyn!”

“No, I don’t believe I care to,” replied her cousin. “Jean, what a funny infant you are! If you heard there was a puppy within ten miles of you, off you ’d run to play with him!” and Evelyn smiled with a little air of patronage, as though she were at least ten years older than eager Jean.

“I ’m coming,” said Frances, twirling round from her chat with Jack. “I ’m not too grown-up for puppy-dogs! Evelyn, you stay and talk some Latin to Jack. He just dotes on learned conversation.” And off skipped naughty Frances, though Jack shot her a reproachful glance.

Carol joined them. “You must see Hiawatha too,” said she. “Jean and he are great chums. Wait till I get some sugar for him.”

“Carol,” said Cecily aside to Hiawatha’s mistress, when she returned with her sugar lumps, “I do feel so sorry for Jean! She’s been perfectly lovely to us, and Evelyn takes it all in such a cool, calm, superior way!”

“Some people do seem to keep their enthusiasm on ice,” observed Carol. “It’s a mystery to me how she and Jean come to be even *second* cousins! I never saw two people

so unlike! Poor little Sister, she's so warm-hearted and sweet!"

They joined the others, who had not waited for them, to find Douglas holding a shaggy Airedale puppy and scientifically pronouncing it a crack-a-jack! Jean and Frances were amusing themselves with the small aristocrat's plebeian playmate, an irresistible little brown mongrel.

Carol went on into the stable, and when the others followed her they found her in a stall feeding her dole of sugar to a beautiful spirited bay. "This is Hiawatha," said she, "and I'm very proud of him."

"Isn't he a beauty!" exclaimed Jean. "Make him ring his dinner bell for them."

A bell and a rope hung suspended near the horse's head. "Are you still hungry, old fellow?" asked Carol. "Well, then, ring your dinner-bell."

Hiawatha seized the rope with his teeth and set the bell tinkling violently, and his mistress gave him another bit of sugar.

"The dear thing!" cried Cecily. "Did you teach him that, Carol?"

"Yes. He has several parlor tricks! Wait till I lead him out. Come pet—back! back!"

"Here, let me help you!" began Douglas. But no hands but hers were needed, as she

backed Hiawatha out of his stall and turned him around to be admired. And how they did praise him, the gentle, noble creature! No wonder he held his head proudly high!

"Father gave him to me on my seventeenth birthday," said Carol. "It was the greatest surprise I ever had in my life!"

"You must surely bring him to Halcyon next summer," said Jean.

"Yes: we'll take turns riding him, Little Sister. Now you must see his latest accomplishment." Carol led the horse to the wall, where a row of bright-colored handkerchiefs hung from pegs. "Tell him which color to give you," said she.

"Hiawatha, give me the red," Frances commanded. Without hesitation the intelligent animal took the red handkerchief in his teeth, twitched it off the peg and held it out to her; but he refused to relinquish it.

"You naughty, naughty thing!" she admonished him. "Come, now, give it to me. Where are your manners? Now that's very rude, to shake it in my face!"

"Hiawatha, you'll get a very bad mark for reciting your lesson like that," said his mistress. "Give it to her or you sha'n't have any more goodies." And the wilful pupil, having no intention of losing his reward, allowed

Frances to pull the handkerchief from between his teeth.

"You cunning dear!" she cried, patting him. "Is n't he the brightest!"

"I never knew anything so clever!" exclaimed Cecily. "Here, pet, give me the white!" Hiawatha obeyed. At Jean's request he presented her with the blue. Then, as if pleased with the applause that followed, he pulled down the remaining handkerchief, an orange and black one, and offered it to his mistress.

"He 's a regular trick horse! He ought to be in a circus!" said Douglas. "Here, old boy, give us the glad hand!" He offered his own and Hiawatha gave him his right hoof. "Thanks, old man!" said Douglas. "How did you teach him all these stunts, Carol?"

"With plenty of apples and sugar when he was good, and very severe scoldings when he was naughty," answered Carol. "Now, Hiawatha, tell us which college you 're for—Yale, Harvard or Princeton." She hung up the handkerchiefs again and touched in turn the red, the blue and the orange and black. The horse instantly chose the blue, and shook it triumphantly.

"He 's a true son of Eli," said Carol, and she rewarded him with her last lumps of sugar.

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Then he shook hands again, made bows, and when asked to tell his name pushed up a small slab of wood, fastened by a hinge to the wall, and disclosed "*Hiawatha*" painted in red letters beneath it.

"Would n't you love to have a horse like that, Jean!" said Douglas, as they left the stable.

"I 'd rather have one than anything else in the world!" she replied longingly. "But I 'm afraid there 's no chance for me while I 'm a little schoolgirl!"

Jack joined the party as they were returning to the house. "I 've had enough learned conversation!" he remarked in a wearied undertone to Frances. "Please don't turn her loose on me again! I don't want to own up to any more of the books I have n't read!"

CHAPTER II

ON THE TRAIL OF THE RED MEN

THEY found the automobiles waiting at the door, and the other girls and boys already seated in them. Mrs. Armstrong had kept a place for Jean, Frances, and Cecily in her car; and Carol squeezed herself in between Evelyn and Hilda in the other. Honk! toot! The autos whizzed on their way—down the hill and along the river road.

“You ’ve been back to the Revolution—*now* we ’ll give you a taste of the old Indian times,” said Carol. “We ’re going to see an old fort that dates back to the days of the Dutch and French settlers. I expect Jean will come home and write a three-volume story about it!”

“I ’ll never forget that blood-and-thunder yarn she made up when I was sick last summer,” said Douglas, who sat facing his young hostess. “We had a chapter a day. It was great! She had brigands and buccaneers, and no end of duels! She ’s going to turn out an authoress.”

“Indeed she is!” Carol agreed, “and all her

friends will shine too—by reflected light. I 'm so glad she 's to compete in the prize story contest at Hazelhurst. She 's such a modest little thing about her own powers: she would n't believe she had a chance, but I *ordered* her to do it! I 'll back Queenie against the whole school—seniors and all! Are any more of your class going to try for it, girls?"

"Evelyn and I are," answered Hilda. "*I 'm* just doing it for fun though. I haven't the ghost of a chance against Jean."

"I don't see why you say that!" exclaimed Evelyn. "*I* think everybody overrates Jean's stories!"

"*We don't!* They 're splendid!" said loyal Hilda.

"Miss Carlton says they show unusual talent," said Carol.

Evelyn did not attempt to disagree in words with the principal of Hazelhurst, but she shrugged her shoulders. "Well, you can tell Jean she 'd get better *order* marks if she did n't compose her stories while she 's fixing up her room and her desk!" she observed.

"She can afford to have poor order marks when she comes out ahead of everyone in Latin and English," said Hilda. "She 's going to be valedictorian, I know that!"

"She 'd better sharpen up her wits in geometry, then," remarked Jean's cousin.

"You can't expect to find mathematicians among literary geniuses!" said Carol. "The bigger your imagination, the less you like mathematics, usually—it's too matter-of-fact! But there's one thing I've noticed about Queenie. The more she dislikes a thing the harder she pegs away at it!"

"It is touching to watch her struggles!" said Evelyn, but her tone was not very sympathetic.

"And it was perfectly beautiful to watch her when *you* came out first in geometry, Evelyn. She ran in to see me the next Sunday and told me how you stood a hundred in the exam, and she was as happy over it as if it were herself she was talking about. That's one of the things I love her for—she's so glad when her friends have their triumphs even if they beat her in the race! And what's more, she never says anything disagreeable about people! If she can't say nice things she keeps mum! There's nothing small about Jean Lennox!" Carol was looking Evelyn full in the face as she spoke, and her glance had meaning in it.

"There's certainly nothing small about her size," replied Evelyn, with a laugh. "I never saw such a bean-pole!"

"You don't want a shorty for a queen!" said Douglas, bluntly. "Jean's going to be stunning when she's grown up!"

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"I think she 's a very fine-looking girl, now," said Carol. "She has the most beautiful eyes I 've ever seen. They 're a regular deep sapphire!"

Douglas threw her an approving glance. He was proud of his friend and sister and liked to hear her praised.

It would have been well if the conversation had dropped there, and Carol intended that it should; but Hilda went on, "You and Jean never had much to do with each other till you came to Hazelhurst, did you, Evelyn?"

"We spent one summer together five years ago," Evelyn answered. "And we squabbled all the time. I couldn't help it—she was the hardest child to get along with! And the queerest little thing too! Always straying off by herself and dreaming, but if you teased her about it she 'd fly into a tantrum! I always used to say she was half crazy."

"You must have been rather surprised then, when you came to school and found her reigning as queen, and the whole class adoring her!" said Carol. "I wish I 'd known her all her precious little life; she was a darling I 'm certain. Perhaps you don't know it, Evelyn, but your cousin is *my Little Sister!*"

"She 's mine too," said Douglas. "And I don't believe she ever was hard to get along

with if you treated her square. She 's a brick from the word go!"

"That 's just what she is!" declared Hilda. "I think she 's the finest girl in school!"

Evelyn's color had risen. She made no reply, but looked down; and this time the subject was allowed to drop.

The autos presently left the river road, and, turning inland, whizzed on till the blue Shawangunk hills were in sight. They passed through a quiet old town where they saw quaint Dutch and Huguenot cottages suggesting legends of the days gone by. Onward still they sped and reached at last a plateau high above the Shawangunk river.

"There 's the fort!" said Carol, pointing to an odd little stone house on the borders of a cornfield. The cars halted, and the sight-seers paid a visit to the ancient building. Turned as it was into a dwelling, the fort looked altogether too peaceful to suit romantic Jean. But signs of warfare were not lacking, for as they strolled through the cornfield, two or three broken arrowheads were picked up from the loose soil.

"The last real battle they ever had with the Indians in this region was fought right here," said Carol. "This stone building was part of a fort put up by the settlers some time afterwards. The Indians had a wooden one on the

same site. If we had come trespassing here in those days we 'd have found ourselves bound on a woodpile and burned alive."

"Then I 'm glad we 're trespassing *now* instead!" exclaimed Jean. "Did the Indians really burn people alive? The horrible creatures!"

"They came pretty near it one day, *here*," replied Carol. "But it was n't the Indians that began the trouble. It was old Governor Stuyvesant. He took some of their chiefs and sold them as slaves. That made the Indians furious, of course, and they vowed vengeance on the whites. So a band of them divided up and went into the little villages of Hurley and Wyldwick, a few at a time, and began to trade with the palefaces as peacefully as you please. The men were most all of them far away, working in distant fields, and so the Indians knew that everything was at their mercy, and suddenly they attacked the towns. They set fire to the houses and dragged the women and children away captive. And when the men in the fields saw the flames and came hurrying back to save their wives and children, two villages in ashes was all that was left them! Well, one of the prisoners was a young French woman named Catherine. And her husband was Louis the Walloon, a splendid, brave man, and a regular leader among the colonists. She was

taken away with her three little boys, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Indians carried their captives off and hid them away in the forest so carefully that the men couldn't rescue them. And so the summer went by, and even big, brave Louis couldn't find his Catherine, to save her.

"The prisoners were finally brought up to this plateau, and the savages built a fort with a palisade around it, to protect themselves from the white men. But by that time they must have been tired of taking care of so many, for they decided to put the women to death. They chose poor Catherine to be the one to die first, and bound her on a pile of wood; and they were just going to set fire to it when, as she lay there waiting for the flames to come leaping up around her, Catherine began to sing. If they 'd seen an angel coming down from the sky, I don't believe the Indians would have been much more astonished. She was singing an old Huguenot hymn; and she must have had a beautiful voice, for they stopped and listened spellbound! There they stood, the old chief Papequanachen and all, never lighting the wood—not daring to touch her, they were so over-awed! The other women saw how the music was keeping them in check, so they joined in too. The hymn Catherine was singing was

By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept, and after that they sang hymn after hymn. And now it was the Indians that were the captives, chained by the wonderful music. But meanwhile, down there in the valley, a band of armed men was stealing along. They crossed the creek and came to the foot of the hill. They were palefaces, but an Indian was guiding them—they had bribed him to lead them to the place where the prisoners were held. The men of Hurley and Wyldwick were coming to rescue their wives and children; and Louis the Walloon was there, and in a very warlike frame of mind, too.

“The guide led the rescue band close under the hill, and suddenly they heard singing! They knew the voices must belong to the white women, and that the prisoners were just above them! I’ve often thought how sweet the singing must have sounded, floating down to them through the trees! But before they could climb the slope an old squaw spied them. She was drawing water at a spring on the hillside, and when she saw them she raised a wild screech that alarmed the Indians. That was the last scream she ever gave, though, for one of the men shot her and she fell into the spring, dead. The whole band rushed up the hill, and the Indians had no time to rally, so they fled,

leaving their prisoners in the fort. The white men chased them, and there was a battle in which Papequanachen was killed. So all the captives were saved, because Catherine had faced death with a martyr's courage, singing the hymns of her Faith."

"That 's the loveliest Indian story I 've ever heard!" exclaimed Jean. "Just think of its being really true. And wasn't Catherine splendid!"

She fell into a reverie as they strolled down the wooded slope up which the brave white settlers had climbed to attack their foes. Carol pointed out the deep, basin-like hollows where the Indians were supposed to have stored their corn, and took them to the spring into which the squaw had fallen.

When they retraced their steps and climbed the hillside Jean lingered far behind the rest. Picture after picture was floating before her mind's eye. She saw the red men in their war paint dragging away the white-faced mothers and their little ones from the burning villages. She saw brave Catherine lying bound on the wood, and her Louis heading the rescue band; and she could almost hear the songs floating down on the breeze from the hill. She jumped, and a little scream escaped her, when a voice grunted "Ugh!" almost in her ear. But she burst out laughing as she turned, for it was not

a savage warrior but Eric who had crept up to her by stealth.

"Red man tell paleface squaw come and be roasted," was his invitation to her to follow the others, and she saw Douglas and Carol hurrying back to find their lost comrade.

"We almost went home without you," said Douglas. "Got to volume third, yet?"

"Pretty nearly," laughed Jean. "I'm going to put Eric in as the villain for scaring me."

"I shall take your majesty out on Hamlet's chain next time," said Carol. "It's not safe to let authors run around loose."

"But I had to think of my story while I was here on the scene of it," explained Jean. "I'm going to take the story of the captive women singing as my subject for the competition. We have to choose something historical, you know, and this is just ideal!"

"I wish you *would* take it, Jean," said Carol. "You'd write it up charmingly, I know. You'll win the prize, as sure as I'm an *Alruna*!"

"Only a consolation prize, I'm afraid," answered Jean. "But I'm wild to try it."

"You'll make a dandy thing out of it, *sure*!" said Douglas.

The sun had set, and the cold night air was

nipping cheeks and noses long before they reached Tallulah. Ragingly hungry, the excursionists at last stopped at the door of Wyndgarth, and hurried upstairs to prepare for an eight o'clock dinner. Evelyn detained her cousin a moment in the hall before going to her room.

"Jean, I've chosen my subject for the prize story," she announced. "I'm going to take the story of Catherine and the other captives singing to save themselves from being burned. It'll write up finely!"

Jean looked at her laughing, yet dismayed. "Why, that's just what I was going to take," said she.

"Oh, botheration!" exclaimed Evelyn. "I might have known it! You always grab up everything!"

"Why, Evelyn Sherwood! I don't!" cried Jean indignantly. "You grabbed this just as much as I did!"

"Well, you needn't fire up. I was only in fun," replied Evelyn, though her tone had been anything but playful. "But isn't it provoking, two of us hitting on the same thing!"

"What's the harm in both of us writing it up, and running a race?" asked Jean.

"That would be too silly!" returned Evelyn. "We don't want to show we've been fishing in

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the same pool! No, you go ahead and write it. You're the Queen, and it's your place to be served first!"

"No, I'm not going to," Jean answered quietly. "I'd really rather not—*now*. Write it yourself. I can easily find something else." She walked on to her own room.

"No, no, no! Take it yourself!" Evelyn called after her petulantly.

"No, no, no! Take it *yourself*," Jean called merrily back. "I'm the Queen, and I command you."

When Jean joined Cecily in their bedroom a cloud was on her face. She was fighting her disappointment—a sharp one, for she had woven a charming little romance around the bit of history, and it was hard to give it up.

"What were you and Evelyn talking about in the hall?" asked Cecily.

"We found we'd both hit on the same subject for the prize story—the women singing in the fort."

"Why don't you both write it up, then?" asked Cecily.

"She was n't willing to do that. She said it would be silly."

"It's perfect nonsense that you couldn't both write the same! Stick to it and tell her so."

"No, I'm not going to," answered Jean

firmly. "There would n't be any pleasure in it now."

"Well, then, that lovely story will be simply murdered!" said Cecily.

"No, it won't. Evelyn writes real good compositions, I think."

"No, she does n't. They're as dry as sawdust. You'd have made a perfectly darling story out of it, but she'll spoil it all."

When Carol came to summon them to dinner, Cecily's displeasure flamed up afresh as she told her of Jean's decision to sacrifice herself.

"Well, I don't think I care to have your majesty write up the Indian story after all," said Carol. "Let Evelyn have it. *Noblesse oblige!* Queens should be generous. Besides, I have another historical subject all ready for you."

"Have you? Oh, do tell me what it is!" cried Jean eagerly.

"I will before you go home. But the funny thing is, this other story brings in singing, too. Come along now; dinner's waiting, and we must fly!"

Carol had planned to treat the village children to an Easter egg hunt the next day, and when dinner was over she slipped away to collect her eggs and dyes. Mrs. Armstrong called Alan to help her find a box of old curios. Eric

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went off to see his puppies safely locked up for the night, and the rest of the party drew close to the dining-room fireside, for a cold March-like gale was rising.

"Listen! What is that queer sound?" Cecily raised a hushing hand. The others listened and heard a sound as of music, sweet, plaintive, vibrant, coming from somewhere aloft in the great brick chimney.

"How weird! What is it? What makes it?" the girls exclaimed.

"Must be the wind," suggested Dick Bradley. "I'd like to know what makes it sound like that, though!"

"Sounds like a banjo," said Jack.

"It's a banshee," said Jean. "There's a ghost up in the chimney!"

"And she's swiped Carol's mandolin," added Douglas.

"My! But it's spooky!" cried Frances.

"But isn't it sweet!" said Phyllis. "And sad too."

They listened to the gentle strains, wondering and conjecturing, till Carol came back with her bowl of eggs.

"Miss Carol," said Ned Conyngham, "there's the ghost of a prima donna up the chimney."

"Oh, you hear Grandmother Veronica's voice, do you?" returned Carol. "My great-

great-great-grandmother left her voice behind her, they say. I thought we'd hear it to-night, there's such a high wind."

"What is it really?" asked Douglas.

"It's only an æolian harp," answered Carol.

"They were always putting harps in the chimneys in these old houses," said Alan, who had just come in with his mother. "It's near the top, but you can hear it down here when the wind blows hard."

"And the tradition is that it is Grandmother Veronica's voice," said Carol. "We have a very romantic story about her—the one I was going to tell you, Jean, so you could write it up. Little Mother, you tell it while we dye the eggs. Come and sit in the old tory's armchair, dearie, and look colonial."

CHAPTER III

THE SECRET ROOM

“THIS house,” began Mrs. Armstrong, “was built by Gilbert Chauncey before the Revolution. He was an old man by the time the war broke out, and he had living with him his two orphan grandchildren, Hugh and Veronica Chauncey. That is Veronica’s picture over the sideboard. Old Gilbert was a staunch tory, and he was so furious when his grandson joined the Continental army that he disinherited him, and made his granddaughter his heir. But Veronica’s sympathies were secretly on the American side too; and one day, as she was looking for wildflowers in the woods near the house, whom should she come upon but a young Continental soldier! She knew the neighborhood was full of red-coats and she warned him of his danger, and told him that she was a Continental at heart even though she *was* a tory’s granddaughter. When the young soldier found he could trust her he told her his story. He was carrying important despatches, and as he was riding along

he had been shot at and his horse so badly wounded that a few minutes later it had fallen dead. He knew that the enemy must be on his track, and he said that unless he could get another horse at once it was all up with him and his mission.

"Veronica gladly offered him her own, but said he must wait till it was brought home from the blacksmith. She told him that while he was waiting she would hide him where the enemy would never dream of finding him—in the house of her tory grandfather, for there was a *secret room* there!"

"Is there really a secret room?" asked Jean.

"So they say," replied Mrs. Armstrong.

"I don't believe it's here now," said Eric, who had joined them and who was stretched on the hearth-rug, with Hamlet for a pillow. "I've looked all over the house, and there's no place for it."

"Oh, but it *might* be here still," said Jean, unwilling to relinquish the romantic thought. "Mrs. Armstrong, may n't we hunt for it to-morrow, just in case we *could* find it?"

"Most certainly, and I hope you'll be successful."

"She won't," declared Eric.

"Maybe she'll be smarter than you, Apple-cheeks," said Alan, at which allusion to his

rosiness Eric threatened his brother with an Easter egg.

“Eric,” said Carol, “If you break my beautiful pink egg, I ’ll dye your cheeks crimson-lake! Now, my brethren, subside, and let mother go on with the story.”

“Well,” Mrs. Armstrong resumed, “the soldier decided to trust himself to Veronica; and as her grandfather was out, she was able to lead him safely into the house without being noticed, and hide him in the secret room. She had hardly done so when in came her grandfather, and with him two red-coat officers on their way to rejoin their regiment. It was late, and old Gilbert Chauncey had invited them to spend the night, and poor little Veronica did n’t see how in the world she was to get her soldier away safely. Her grandfather gave his guests a banquet to prove his loyalty; and to make matters worse, the only person she could trust to help her was Hannibal, an old slave, who was busy waiting on the table. But all the time the feast was going on her little ladyship was plotting and planning. When at last the officers had left the table she managed to have a word with Hannibal, and told him when he heard her singing in the parlor to go and let the soldier out of his hiding-place, and send him away on her horse. Then she went to her harp sichord and began singing tory songs. O’

course in a minute she had the officers beside her listening entranced, and her grandfather too, for she had an exceedingly beautiful voice. And soon the gallant red-coats joined in the chorus and sang at the top of their voices! And they sang so merrily that nobody heard when Hannibal let the young soldier out; and nobody heard the clatter of hoofs when he galloped away!"

"Was n't she a little heroine!" exclaimed Jean. "Carol, you must be ever so proud of your Grandmother Veronica!"

"But that 's only part first," said Mrs. Armstrong. "A few weeks later Veronica's horse was mysteriously returned to her, so of course she knew the soldier had reached his destination safely. Then first her grandfather died, and then her brother was killed in the war, so poor Veronica was left all alone. Two years went by, and one day an officer in Continental uniform came riding up to the door. It was Major Alan Armstrong, and he was the very same soldier whom she had hidden in the secret room. He had come back at last to thank her properly; and he thanked her very properly indeed, for he asked her to become his wife! And so Veronica Chauncey became Veronica Armstrong, and this house has come down in the Armstrong family. There is a tradition that Grandmother Veronica used to sing to Major

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Alan and their children every evening, and that she left her voice here in the chimney as a legacy to her descendants."

"That 's a splendid story!" cried the girls.

"It 's simply perfect for the competition!" whispered Jean to Carol.

The egg-dyeing over, Mrs. Armstrong called the guests to examine the contents of her box. "You must look at these curios now," said she. "One of Veronica's sons was a sea captain and brought them from the East. There are various stories about him—how he fought in the war of 1812 and had all sorts of adventures."

When the captain's collection of curiosities, gathered from many lands, had been examined it was time to say goodnight.

"Evelyn, I 'm going to take the story of Veronica for my subject," said Jean as they were leaving the room.

Her cousin looked a trifle embarrassed: she had not been altogether comfortable that evening. "It 's a very pretty story," she said. "You 're sure you like it just as well?"

"I like it a great deal better! You 're quite welcome to Catherine!" replied Jean. She stopped before the portrait of the fair Colonial dame with the dark eyes and the powdered hair. "Goodnight, Veronica," said she. "I 'm going to find the place where you hid your soldier, to-morrow."

The next morning was devoted to an excursion by steam-launch to West Point to see the Military Academy. Early in the afternoon came the work of hiding the Easter eggs in different parts of the grounds, and this was scarcely finished before the troop of village children arrived. Carol had to take charge of her little guests, and so Jean was asked to play hostess to the house party.

"I can manage the chick-a-biddies," Carol told her, "but I can't entertain all the girls, too. Suppose you take them on a hunt for the secret room. Eric will show you around. Take them down cellar, Eric. I want them to see that odd step in the stairs with the brass nails in it."

Before Jean could collect her forces, Evelyn, Hilda, and Phyllis had gone off with Alan, Dick and Ned for a stroll. But Cecily, Betty and Frances were as eager as Jean to investigate; and Douglas and Jack were pressed into the service. Eric conducted the explorers to the cellar. "This is the step," said he, pointing out the lowest one of the cellar stairs. The top of it was fastened down with a row of large brass nails, and hinges at the back showed that it must have been used as a box."

"Have n't you ever opened it?" asked Jean.

"No—I 've never been here much myself, and I never bothered."

"Open it now," said Frances.

"All right; wait till I get some tools." Eric ran off, and the others explored the cellar, satisfying themselves that there, at least, no secret room existed.

"Maybe the old tory chap kept his money here," suggested Eric, as, returning with hammer and chisel, he set to work. The girls watched him eagerly while he pried open the lid.

"Hello! There *is* something here!" Neither gold nor silver appeared, but Eric drew out a folded piece of paper, yellow with age, the sole contents of the box.

"That must be old Chauncey's will," said Jack.

Eric unfolded the paper and they saw, written in pale, faded ink, a series of figures, Roman and Arabic.

"What under the moon can it be!" exclaimed Jean, as they read:

XX 1 XI 5—VI XII 9 VII VIII XX—XX 21
XVIII XIV—XX 15—XX VIII 5—XVIII 9 VII
VIII XX—XX VIII 5 XIV—VII 15—VI 15 XVIII
XX VIII—5 1 XIX XX—II 25—XIV 15 XVIII
XX VIII—XX 9 XII XII—1—XIX XX 5 5 XVI—
1 XIX III 5 XIV XX—XXV 15 21—XIII 5 5
XX—XIX III 1 XII 5—XX VIII 5—VIII 5 9 VII
VIII XX—XX VIII 9 XVIII XX 25—VI 5 5 XX—
VI XVIII 15 XIII—XX VIII 5—II XVIII 15 XI

5 XIV—1 XVIII XVIII 15 XXIII—XIII 5 1 XIX
 21 XVIII 5—VI 5 XII XII—XX VIII 5—XXIII 15
 15 IV—1 XIV IV—VI 9 XIV IV—XX VIII 5—XX
 XVIII 5 1 XIX 21 XVIII 5

“What can all those numbers mean?” asked Cecily.

“It looks like cipher!” said Douglas.

“That ’s so!” Jack agreed. “See here! There was a lot doing around this place in the Revolution, was n’t there? You don’t suppose this is a cipher despatch!”

“I bet it is!” cried Eric.

“It is! It is!” declared Jean, in great excitement. “It ’s a Revolutionary despatch!”

“Let ’s study it out!” said Cecily. They hurried upstairs and settled themselves around the library table with pencils and paper.

“How do you begin, anyway? Give us a starter, Scotchy,” said Jack.

“If it ’s a cipher, every number must stand for a letter,” replied Douglas. “I ’ll make three or four copies, so we can all get at it. Now then,” he said, when he had finished, “count up and see what number is repeated most.”

“*Twenty* and *five* both come in twenty-three times,” Cecily announced, after a long silence. “They are the *oftenest*!”

“Then one of them probably stands for *e*,” said Douglas. “*E* is the commonest letter in

English. Now if we find three numbers, and either *five* or *twenty* the last of them, coming in together several times in the same order, we 'll know they must spell *the*. Then we 'll have three letters, and that 'll help us quite a bit."

"Double X, V three I's, and figure 5 come in five times," said Jean.

"And those *dashes* come in fore and aft," added Jack. "They must mark the divisions between words."

"Here 's the figure 1 all by itself," said Frances. "It must stand for a word of one letter, *a* or *I*."

"Here," cried Douglas, at last. "I 've got it! The whole key! They just numbered the letters according to the way they stand in the alphabet. A is one, and B is two, and so on. And they used the Roman numbers for the consonants, and our ordinary ones for the vowels."

"Oh, pshaw! Could n't they be any foxier than *that*!" said Eric, who had been scowling hopelessly a minute before.

"It can't be an army despatch," said Jack. "They 'd have used a harder cipher. Must be the Major's bread and butter letter to Veronica."

"How do you know but it 's buried treasure?" suggested Douglas. "Did n't Captain Kidd ever come up the Hudson?"

“Let ’s hurry up and translate it anyway,” said Cecily. “I ’ll write out the alphabet and number the letters, so we won’t have to count up each time.”

With the aid of Cecily’s numbered alphabet they deciphered the mysterious document, and the excitement increased with every word made plain. The cipher, when wholly interpreted, they found to run thus:

Take flight. Turn to the right.
Then go forth, East by North,
Till a steep ascent you meet.
Scale the height. Thirty feet
From the broken arrow measure.
Fell the wood and find the treasure.

“It is buried treasure!” cried Jean. “I know what it means! The sea-captain who brought back all those curios probably fought with pirates and came home with their hordes of treasure! It’s as plain as day! I’m certain we shall find heaps of gold and diamonds if we hunt, and we ’ll all be rolling in wealth!”

“You’ve solved the problem!” declared Cecily. “Of course it was the captain, and he buried the treasure so it would be safe while he was off at sea!”

“And he must have buried it in a hollow tree,” said Frances. “We ’ll have to find it and chop it down!”

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“No!” said Jean. “There wouldn’t be room enough in a tree. It’s buried down under the roots.”

“Jean, you beat Sherlock Holmes,” said Douglas. “But don’t you forget, when we get rich, that *I* gave you the key to the cipher!”

“Things are sure coming our way!” cried Eric. “Let’s stop talking and get a move on! But I bet it’s been dug up long ago,” he added, his face falling.

“Oh, we’ll find *something*. Don’t you worry,” Douglas assured him. “Come on, let’s excavate these diggings!”

“‘*Take flight.*’ I’m sure that just means *go a long distance* before you turn to the right,” said Cecily. “But where do we take flight from?”

“From the cellar, I guess,” answered Eric; and he studied his paper. “‘*Then go forth, East by North, till a steep ascent you meet.*’ That might mean the Van Sicklens’ hill. It’s about Northeast of us, and it’s woody.”

“We’ll have to get an ax and a spade,” said Betty.

“Let’s see if we can find the arrow, before we lug along an ax and a spade,” Jack advised.

“I’m going to tell Carol and make her come too,” began Jean.

"I 'll go after her." And off went Douglas, paper in hand. He returned alone. "Carol can't leave the kids till they 've had their ice-cream, but she wants us to go on and hunt."

"Does she think there 's anything in it?" asked Jean.

"She thinks it 's worth investigating. Come along; let 's start."

From the cellar they "took flight" as far as the road. There, turning to the right they found themselves looking towards the Van Sicklens' hill.

"I don't suppose there 's a chance the arrow could be there still," said Cecily, as they walked up the road.

"I suppose you realize, too," said Jack, "that the first week of our search will have to be devoted to finding what part of the steep ascent to climb up."

"We 'll probably have to go over every square foot of it," said Jean, "but who cares?"

Not even the prospect of scouring the entire hillside could daunt the girls, and as for Douglas, his zeal seemed to increase with every step. The steep ascent reached, they exploited the foot-path, but though they scaled the height to the very top, not even an arrow head appeared.

"Look here," said Douglas, as discouragement was settling down upon the party,

"Maybe '*take flight*' means *take a flight of steps*! Let's go back to the cellar and start over again."

The other guests had returned from their walk by the time the treasure-seekers reached the house, and were ready to join the search as soon as they were shown the mysterious rhyme. With this reinforcement the expedition set forth again from the head of the cellar stairs.

"Right face!" Douglas commanded. They turned, and found themselves facing the kitchen.

"I believe it's buried somewhere in the house!" cried Jean. "I believe it's hidden in the secret room!"

"Sherlock's hit it again!" said Douglas. "'*Fell the wood*' means '*Chop down a wall*!' Of course Mrs. Armstrong won't mind a little thing like that."

To go forth East by North they now discovered meant to pass through the kitchen and dining-room into the main hall.

"*Voilà* the steep ascent!" said Jack, waving his hand towards the staircase.

"How about the arrow?" asked Cecily. "There aren't any arrows stuck up around here, are there, Eric?"

"No," replied Eric, "but we've picked up arrow heads on the place."

"Carol says there are stacks of old things



"THERE'S THE ARROW!" SHE SCREAMED.

up in the attic," said Betty. "We *might* find an arrow hidden away."

"Or the broken arrow might be some mysterious symbol," said Jean. "You hear about cabalistic signs. Anyhow, let 's scale the height and keep on to the attic."

Ascending the first flight, they pursued their quest up the narrow stairs leading to the garret. An ideal attic it was, a treasure-house in itself, with its great oaken chests and ancestral relics.

"You don't want to poke through all that old junk, do you?" Eric inquired lazily.

"Yes, of course we do!" replied Frances, trying to raise a heavy lid.

Jean turned to examine one of the chimneys, in the hope that in some cranny she might find a piece of the broken weapon. Her eyes wandered up to the rafters, then down to the floor.

"*There 's* the arrow!" she screamed, pointing to a spot at her feet. Sure enough, there, painted on the rough floor was a tiny red arrow, the shaft divided in two.

"Hello!" cried Eric. "Why, I never saw *that* before!"

Great was the exultation of the company until there came the question of measuring the thirty feet. Pacing off the length of the attic, the boys found it to be only twenty-seven feet.

"Thirty feet takes you out of the window," said Jack.

"How about thirty feet straight down?" asked Douglas. "Let 's see: drop a plumb-line down through the arrow thirty feet—that ought to land us in the dining-room alongside the fireplace."

"Land us in the china-closet," said Eric.

"We 've got it now! I know we have!" declared Jean. "There must be a secret cubby-hole in the china-closet!"

"Come on, then," said Jack.

They hastened downstairs, to be met by Carol, who had just dismissed her flock. "Have n't you found it yet?" she asked. "You ought to be staggering under bags of gold by this time."

They told her of the painted arrow, and she hurried with them to the dining-room. The chimney, in which they had heard Veronica's voice, projected far out from the wall. The angle to the left was occupied by a three-cornered chimney-cupboard. On the right a mahogany china-closet had been built, and made to extend from the fireplace to the side of the room.

"Plenty of wood to fell here!" said Dick Bradley.

Carol threw open the closet doors, and the explorers found that in the center the lowest shelf

was placed about four feet from the floor. Beneath this could be seen the broad panelled wainscoting of the room.

"Secret rooms always have sliding panels," said Jean. "Let 's try and see whether any of these slide."

Douglas and Eric set to work testing the wainscoting by rapping and pressure. "This panel won't budge any more than the chimney," began Eric.

"Same here," said Douglas. "No! Look here! Here 's one that does n't seem to fit very tight." At the bottom of this panel there was an all but imperceptible crack.

"Let 's see if we can pry it out," said Douglas, and he forced the blade of his knife into the crack. Suspense had now reached its height, and the girls watched him breathlessly. But the panel remained fixed. Finding the prying method of no use, Douglas passed his knife-blade back and forth in the crack, until it came in contact with something hard. He pressed it against the obstacle and was rewarded by finding that it yielded.

"Hello! I believe I 've slipped a bolt!" he exclaimed. "Now we 'll see if the panel will move." A moment more and the youthful cracksman had it out, revealing an entrance into a dark inner closet. How they all cheered! The secret room was found!

CHAPTER IV

TREASURE TROVE

YES, the secret room was discovered at last!

“See, it was a bolt that held the panel,” said Douglas, and to the treasure-seekers clustered before the china-closet, he displayed a small, square piece of metal inserted into a deep groove in the surbase. Then he showed them the corresponding groove in the panel into which it had fitted, and from which his knife had displaced it, freeing the little door.

Eric lost not a second in entering the secret premises. Douglas, Jack and Jean followed and found themselves in a space about the depth of the china-closet, and nearly as long.

“We’ve *felled the wood!* Now let’s find the treasure!” said Jean.

“Here she is!” announced Eric, as in the darkness he stumbled against a bulky obstacle. “Hooray! I bet it’s the old captain’s locker!”

Jean’s cry of rapture was echoed by the girls outside. “Bring it out! Bring it out!” they called impatiently.

The coffer was dragged to the entrance, hoisted on end, and pulled forth into the light of day. It proved to be a small, dark-colored wooden chest, bound with brass, and battered as if from years of rough and varied experience, and the sight of it was enough to bring the glitter of gold before one's eyes.

"The cap'n must have been an easy-going old chap," observed Jack. "He did n't bother much about new padlocks, did he?" The chest was fastened merely by sticks thrust into the hasps, the padlocks being gone.

"It 's been broken into!" groaned Eric. Anxiously he raised the lid, and the girls as anxiously bent to look. "No, it has n't either! Here 's a *lot* of stuff!" The captain's trustfulness had not been abused: the coffer evidently held treasure of some sort, wrapped in a piece of purple brocade. Eric lifted a fold of this covering, and they saw—not indeed Spanish coin—but yet the glitter of gold and silver, the sparkle of gems, and the lustre of mother-of-pearl; for the upper layer of the hoard consisted of antique trinkets and curios.

"Not much treasure about that!" grumbled Eric, but there was a scream of delight from the girls.

"They 're presents from the captain to his lady-love, and she must have died before he got home!" suggested Jean.

“Oh, look at that *exquisite* necklace!” said Betty.

“And see this beautiful little gold box, studded with gems!” cried Cecily, on her knees before the locker. She held up a small round box, all of gold, the cover set with a circle of tiny yellow topazes.

“Open it, Cece,” said Jean. “Maybe it ’s full of diamonds and rubies and emeralds!”

Peeping out from under the lid was a small slip of paper, on which something was written. Cecily glanced at it and read aloud: “Sugar-plums for the Frisky Mouse!”

Blankly the girls stared at each other, for *Frisky Mouse* was the sobriquet of merry, black-eyed Frances Browne! “Oh, pshaw! It ’s only a joke!” exclaimed Cecily. Then the girls burst into a peal of merriment, and the boys into a hilarious shout—with the exception of Eric, who contented himself with the bitter comment, “Stung!”

“Carol! You wretch! You fraud! You wicked Alruna!” The Queen fell upon her chief councillor and shook her, laughing.

“What is your majesty attacking *me* for?” Carol inquired, with a face of child-like and reproachful innocence. “Sea captains always travel about with a whole menagerie of pet tigers and orang-utans and boa-constrictors! Captain Armstrong would n’t have been worthy

of his ship if he had n't owned at least a tame *mouse*! Be careful of those candies, Frances! they may turn out to be 'Rough on Rats,' sugar-coated!"

"I'll try one on Jack," said Frances, who had pounced on the golden box, and found it filled with tiny sweets.

"I'm always ready to sacrifice myself in a good cause," said Jack, and he helped himself to three, only to be charged with greed.

"'For the Princess of the Scroll!' 'For the Princess of the Treasure!'" read out Cecily, gathering up more riches from the hoard. "Please explain how the captain came to be acquainted with Betty and me a whole century before we existed!"

"Why, the *uncle-cestor* of an Alruna ought to have *some* knack for reading the future and foretelling who were coming to loot his treasure, ought n't he?" said Carol. "It was a very sensible idea, I'm sure, to have everything already labelled, so that the ladies of the Sword of Love would n't squabble."

"Well, when did *you* find that secret room, anyhow?" asked Eric.

"When did the *captain*, you mean," his sister corrected. "This is *his* locker, not mine."

"But are all these beautiful things really and truly for *us*?" asked Betty.

"Is this gorgeous box really for me?" said

Frances. "Look, girls, it has *Gilbert Chauncey* engraved on it!"

"Yes, the old tory bequeathed you his snuff-box, Frisk," said Carol. "Help yourselves to the plunder, Silver Sworders."

"You old duck of an Alruna!" exclaimed Jean. "I forgive you all your wickedness!"

The plunder was divided, and if it had indeed been diamonds the girls could not have shown more delight, as each found awaiting her some unique and charming gift with her name attached. Cecily was enchanted with her trophy—a big French fan, a relic of the days of Louis XV. It was of creamy satin, and painted upon it were gay little beaux and belles dancing the minuet. Its sticks were of ivory, so finely carved that they looked like lace-work. Betty was in raptures over an antique French necklace which Carol hung around her throat. The beads were large, clear crystals, beautifully cut and set in silver filigree; and the filigree pendant held, encircled in crystals, the tiniest of porcelain miniatures, showing the face of a pretty demoiselle with a rose in her powdered hair. Hilda's delight rivalled Betty's, when she received the pair of silver and crystal bracelets that matched the necklace, each with its dainty miniature set in the clasp. Phyllis fell heir to a pair of solid gold shoe-buckles studded with garnets, the very things to adorn

her hat and belt. Evelyn's prize was a gold purse or reticule, hung on a thin gold chain. It was only two inches square and was set with turquoises; and it exhaled, when she opened it, a faint aromatic perfume, showing it to be a vinaigrette.

Jean won, as her share of the spoil, a little box of shining mother-of-pearl. "What a beauty of a box!" she began, but she found it to be only the casket of the real treasure inside. "Oh, Carolie!" She drew a long breath of delight, as, opening it, she brought out an exquisite ivory miniature. It was framed in pearls, and the back was of antique ruddy gold. It was meant to be worn as a pendant, for it was hung on a chain of golden links. But Jean forgot the richness of the setting in gazing on the picture itself, which was painted in tones as delicate as the tints of a seashell. Out from her frame of pearls looked the round winsome face of a little maiden. She had not long stepped out of babyhood, yet her sunny curls were gathered up on top of her head, and her dimpled shoulders peeped out from a folded white kerchief.

"You darling!" cried Jean. "You little love! Who is she, Carol?"

The quaint baby beauty made a conquest of hearts on the spot. "She looks like one of Sir Joshua Reynolds' children!" said artist Cecily.

She glanced from the child's face to the Alruna's, full of sweetness and charm; to her lovely deep-lashed, soft brown eyes, and her curly, bright-chestnut hair. "I think *you* must have looked like that, Carol, when you were a little tot. Was n't your hair just that red-gold color? It's red-gold-brown now. What grandmother is she? A great-great?"

"No grandmother at all, and she was n't a darling either," replied Carol. "She was a horrid little thing, with a very bad temper. That red in her hair is her temper streak. That's your Big Sister, Jean, at the mature age of five. And now I'll do a little more confessing—that is, if your majesty does n't garrote me first!" For Jean had fallen upon her once more, not to shake but to embrace. "The miniature that belonged in that locket was broken, so Grandfather had little *me* put in, dressed up in eighteenth century style, and I'm giving myself to you, Queenie, because I know that with all her faults you love your Big Sister still."

"You're the dearest Sister that ever lived!" said Jean. "And I'd rather have *this* than anything I can think of! Oh, is n't it beautiful, with the pearls and the gold! But your darling baby self! She's the best treasure of them all."

Hanging the chain about Jean's neck, Carol

went on with her confession. "Well, now it's all up with me, so I'll plead guilty to everything. Grandfather left me two big chests full of heirlooms—a hundred and fifty years old and more, some of them are—and I thought you'd like a few as souvenirs of this old home."

The chests had contained heirlooms from soldierly grandfathers as well as from gentle grandmothers, and Carol now tossed aside the brocade and revealed a regular arsenal of weapons. "I couldn't find any Scotch claymores," said she, "so allow me to arm the chief of Clan Gordon with a Spanish rapier instead." And she presented Douglas with a long slender weapon not less than two centuries old.

"Thank you ever so much! I never saw such a stunner! Whe-ew! And it's two-edged! Must have done good work! Ha! Have at thee, Jack!" Douglas made a scientific lunge at his chum, but Jack was soon able to defend himself, for Carol handed him a Turkish scimitar, with a curved blade and a hilt of beaten brass. She then armed Dick and Ned with cutlasses. "And this is for you, Eric!" She brought out a fine sabre. "See what Grandfather wrote on it: 'Major Armstrong's sword. To be given to my grandson, Eric.' I found it in the attic."

"It's a dandy!" said Eric, a pessimist no longer. "Now the loot's divvied up, so go

ahead and tell a fellow. When did you find that secret room?"

"Years ago," Carol answered. "Howard and Al and I all found it together, but we kept dark about it, because Grandfather told us it was an old family law, if you found the room never to tell anyone where it was. And you see I did n't tell you *out and out*, I merely left a few hints in cipher."

"And how did you make that cipher look as old as the Revolution?" asked Jean.

"Oh, I just tore a page out of an ancient notebook that I found, and watered my ink. And the last time Alan came home we ran out here and buried the treasure and painted the arrow on the garret floor. But Douglas was unkind enough to see through it. When he came and showed me the paper, I saw by the twinkle in his eye that he had guessed, so I had to confess. But I did n't tell him where the treasure was buried."

"Douglas Gordon!" said Jean, with awful severity, "do you mean to say you guessed it and then kept it all to yourself?"

"Well, you see," Douglas admitted, "I've been reading Poe's *Gold Bug* lately. That's all about buried treasure, and the man finds a cipher that shows him how to look for it. That's why I knew about *e* and *the*, and worked it out so easily. And I thought maybe the per-

son who wrote *this* cipher had been reading *The Gold Bug* too."

"Gold bugs are very useful insects!" answered Carol.

"Jack!" Cecily turned upon her cousin. "Did you suspect, too?"

"Oh, well, I had a kind of subconscious feeling we might find 'April Fool!' written on the coffer," Jack confessed.

A thorough investigation was then made of the secret room and its construction. The china-closet in the dining-room and the dresser in the kitchen were shown to be each about nine inches shallower than the side of the chimney which they flanked; and it was the space between the two that formed the hiding-place.

"Shucks!" growled Eric. "If I'd known it was a little bit of a closet I'd have found it myself. I thought it was a whole room!" He returned to his sword for consolation; and when Alan came in with the mail he heard the clash of arms and beheld five combatants thrusting, feinting and parrying, for the benefit of their fair ladies, and at the imminent risk of disfiguring one another for life.

"I feel," remarked Jean, when peace reigned once more, "as if, wherever I touched the wall or anything else, jewels would come tumbling out." She was examining her mother-of-pearl box as she spoke. It was lined with blue satin.

"Why, what's this hard lump under the lining!" she exclaimed. "Don't tell me it's *more* buried treasure!" The satin was a trifle frayed, and she noticed a slight rent. Inserting a finger in the hole, she drew forth a ring!

"Wonders will never cease!" cried Carol, her eyes wide with amazement. "How did *that* get there?"

The girls pressed about eagerly to see the ring. It was of chased gold, set with a large amethyst in which was cut a monogram.

"It's a seal ring!" said Carol, studying the initials. "*V, C*,—Veronica Chauncey! Alan! Eric! This is Grandmother Veronica's ring! What a treasure!"

"Wish it was the Major's cuff-links—I've lost one of my best," remarked Alan.

"You're a splendid actress, Carol," said Jean, "but you can't April-fool us this time!"

"No, indeed! We're too wise birds now," said Cecily.

"My dear girls, nobody's April-fooled but myself!" cried Carol. "I never saw that ring in my life before!"

"Carol Armstrong," said Jean solemnly, "do you really mean to say *you* didn't hide it there?"

"Jean Lennox, on my word of honor, I never saw, heard of, or dreamed of this ring! I'm

as much surprised as you are, and a hundred times more so!"

"Well, then," said Jean, "I'm glad you're paid back, you naughty Alruna! It serves you right! I'm glad you have a present yourself too! What a beauty of a stone! Wasn't it lucky I felt that lump and poked my finger in?"

"I'll bless you forever, Queenie. Oh, girls, you don't know what a precious find this is for me! Veronica's own ring! And this must be her jewel box, too. I thought it would make a pretty case for the miniature. Wasn't it good that I did! If I hadn't, we might never have found the ring!"

"V, C,—C, V," said Jean. "Caritas et Veritas! Look, girls, you can read it either way—the letters are tangled up so! Veronica ought to have belonged to the Order!"

"Why, actually she had the Silver Sword initials, hadn't she!" said Carol. "What a coincidence! And she was loyal and loving! You'll have to adopt her as the Grandmother of the Order! Wait a minute—I must show the ring to Mother."

She hurried upstairs to share the surprise with Mrs. Armstrong, and soon returned with the jewel in her hand. "Your majesty," said she, "let me invest you with your *signet ring*! I'm not allowed to make you a present of it

really, but it is to be yours for purposes of state, and you must sign all your decrees with it. Hold out your royal finger." She slipped it on Jean's finger, and it fitted perfectly.

"May I really wear it, and use it for my signet?" asked Jean, delighted. "Oh, I 'll take the best care of it! Thank you ever and ever so much, Carolie. Battle maids, don't you ever dare to disobey me *now*, when you get your orders stamped with the Queen's seal!"



THE PLUNDERERS ARRAYED THEMSELVES FOR THE EVENING.



CHAPTER V

THE MYSTERIOUS HORSEMEN

THE rest of the afternoon signalized by the treasure trove was given up to rifling every chest in the attic; and stiff brocades, taffeta slips, and an entire Continental uniform were among the spoils in which the plunderers arrayed themselves for the evening. At dinner time Jean and Cecily came rustling down stairs in flowered brocades, their hair powdered, one with the miniature at her throat and the ring on her finger, the other flirting her fan with all the airs and graces of the court of Versailles. Frances had buried her gypsy face in a white satin poke-bonnet with limp purple flowers, and wrapped herself in a crimson silk shawl, and she insisted on warming her hands in an enormous muff. Phyllis in pointed bodice and quilted petticoat minced proudly with jeweled buckles on her shoon; and Evelyn, who, as well as Betty and Hilda, was a lady of the Empire, in a short-waisted gown, had to resort to her vinaigrette to keep from swooning at the sight of the terrible Moor, Jack, who had donned a

great-great-grandmother's muslin turban, and was armed with his scimiter.

Indeed, the evening threatened to be sanguinary. The stage villain, Douglas, with cloak, slouch hat and rapier, was always on the point of a duel with Major Alan of the Continental army, or the short but redoubtable Captain Eric of the navy. The pirates, Dick and Ned, kept their cutlasses in their belts, ready against the slightest provocation; yet they proved flowers of courtesy, Dick the buccaneer gallantly offering his arm to Grandmother Carol in her black satin gown and demure lace cap and fichu.

Lady Martha Washington herself received the company at the door of the drawing-room, for Mrs. Armstrong had put on mob-cap and kerchief in honor of the occasion; and before dinner was announced the masqueraders practised the steps of the minuet, while the Mother of her country played for them on Veronica's harpsichord.

"We need only the mysterious horsemen to make the party complete," said Carol. "Mother forgot to tell you that part of the story, didn't she? They say the day Veronica was married they had a grand ball here, and just as they were dancing the minuet they heard horses come galloping up to the door. The

next minute there came two thundering knocks, but when they went to see who was there they could n't find anyone. Only a tremendous gust of wind rushed in and nearly blew them away. It must have been some queer sound made by the wind, but the Major always declared it was the ghosts of the British officers coming to scare Veronica in revenge for the trick she had played on them."

The minuet was in full swing; Major Alan had just bowed to Jean, when a loud *rap-rap-rap* sounded at the door. It followed Carol's story so promptly that the dancers stopped in sheer surprise. *Rap-rap-rap-rap!* the ancient door-knocker hammered thunderously. The music ceased abruptly. Hamlet, roused from his nap on the hearth, sprang up with a savage bark and growl. The same exclamation was on every lip. "The mysterious horsemen!" Alan took the dog by the collar. Carol opened the door, and her cry of surprise had a note of glad welcome too.

"Howard! Why!—Court Hamilton!"

The newcomers were tall young fellows and of about the same age. The first, one would have recognized anywhere as Alan's elder brother. The second was well known to the girls who had camped at Halcyon, for he was Jack's brother and Cecily's cousin. If Carol

was surprized to see them, they were no less amazed at sight of her sombre gown and the lace cap on her curly hair.

“Who ’s this?” asked Howard. “My great-grandmother? Why, Granny, how-d’ye-do?”

“Good evening, mysterious horsemen!” Carol dropped them a profound curtsy.

“Good evening, mysterious Lady!” Court made her a bow equally profound. “I thought I was going to find the Alruna here, but I ’m afraid I ’m walking in on a fancy-dress ball!”

“No, only on the year 1776,” she answered laughing, as they shook hands cordially. “Here comes Lady Washington!” she added, for Mrs. Armstrong had hastened out from the drawing-room.

“Comment vous portez-vous, monsieur? Where have you come from? Did you drop down from the *sky*?” asked Cecily, favoring her tall cousin with her finger tips, like a true *grande dame*.

“No, mademoiselle, I ’ve only come up from Florida, and I did *not* come on an airship. I suppose you did n’t hear how I got a chance to join a government survey corps down there,” said Court, who was studying engineering.

Howard Armstrong had promised to join the house-party in time to lead the cotillion on the following evening, and he had been pledged to

bring some friend with him. "I was going to get Billy Burton," he explained, "but I found Court hanging about, so I brought him along instead. I thought we might as well come out a day ahead and make sure we have the figures planned out all right." He was commended for his choice of a substitute.

"It 's awfully good of you to take me in like this," said Court. "I called at the house this afternoon, and Howard said you were all out here and told me to come along too. Please send me right off again if you don't want me."

"Of course we want you," said Carol. "This is perfectly delightful! We can have a regular Halcyon reunion now. But you don't know what consternation you spread, you two, knocking at the door like the ghosts of the red-coats!" And she told him the legend of the spectral riders. "But you didn't manage the thing correctly at all," she declared. "The idea of two mysterious horsemen having only one horse between them, and that one attached to a hack!"

"I 'd have had Cyclone sent down from Halcyon on purpose, if I 'd only known, and come galloping up *à la* Paul Revere," said Court.

"Dear old Cyclone!" exclaimed Jean. "How is he, the beauty?"

"Very poorly. He 's fading away with anx-

iety to know whether Carol's going to bring Hiawatha up to Halcyon this summer, so they can have some good gallops together."

"See here," Howard put in. "I want some thanks and appreciation. Here are all your cotillion favors."

"You blessed brother!" cried Carol. "I've been worrying my hair gray for fear you'd forget all about them."

"He saw *my* package, and that jogged his forgettory," said Court. "Mrs. Armstrong, I thought you and Carol might enjoy a little whiff of Florida." He presented a large box, which Jack suggested to Frances might contain a youthful alligator. The box, however, turned out to be full of beautiful, creamy orange- and lemon-blossoms, imbedded in silver-gray moss, and richly deserving the praises which they won.

"Oh, thank you! How perfectly delicious!" said Carol, burying her face in the blossoms. "Court, your whiff of Florida is just what we need for to-morrow night. It'll make the prettiest part of the decoration."

With Court and Howard to complete the gathering, the evening was a doubly merry one. First, an impromptu dance was held. After that, Veronica not being on hand to sing to her harpsichord, her great-great-great-granddaughter acted as substitute at the modern piano, for

she had a precious gift in that sweet voice of hers, and was going to Germany next Fall, to perfect it. And if the red-coat officers of long ago joined in the tory airs as heartily as the boys and girls and the mysterious horsemen joined in the College songs, it was no wonder that Veronica's fugitive soldier had escaped unheard from the secret room.

Next morning there were April showers. Let the rain pour! Who cared! Certainly not the young people of the house-party, who busied themselves indoors, making additional favors, and who invaded the kitchen to engage in an all-important ceremony, without which the cotillion could not be allowed to take place.

Grandmother Veronica had bequeathed to her descendants a wonderful receipt for fruit-cake; and this cake, since the day when she had regaled General Washington with it, had figured among the delicacies at every ball and banquet held in the old mansion. And so to-day there was a great beating of eggs, weighing of sugar and flour, and slicing of citron; and Carol, in a checked apron, held sway over a mixing-bowl, to the amusement of the incredulous cook whose domain she had usurped. According to custom every one must take part in stirring the cake, and the wooden spoon was wielded with an energy that bade fair to wreck the enterprise.

"Court, excuse me," Chef Carol gently interposed. "We all have the greatest admiration for your athletic strength, but really that spoon isn't the steering wheel of an auto! It's not necessary to use quite as much muscle as you did when you stopped that runaway last summer! And there's just a chance the spoon might break, and the bowl too!"

"Here, I'll show you how!" said Jack with much superiority. "Rapidity of motion and lightness of touch are what you want." And Jack proceeded to demonstrate.

"Hold up!" his brother commanded. "You're exceeding the speed limit. I don't like the way you skid around that turn."

But, too many cooks notwithstanding, Veronica's cake came out of the oven light, fruity and delicious, to receive its coat of icing, and later to be cut into squares ready for serving.

In the afternoon the greenhouse was despoiled, that its flowers might grace the rooms for the dance; and hardly was the robbery over when the sun flashed forth again, calling the company out for a ramble along the river bank and through the woods from which they brought back trophies of early Spring.

Evening came at last and brought the climax of the holidays, the cotillion. Would those boarding-school lassies ever forget that supreme event! What thrills of anticipation

there were as, at eight o'clock, they came fluttering down stairs in their light, dainty dresses, and gathered in the drawing-room to await the arrival of the guests.

Frances, the best dancer in Hazelhurst, felt that the most glorious hour of her existence was at hand, for Carol's "grown-up" brother, Howard, had chosen her to lead the cotillion with him. Jean was experiencing little tremors of apprehension. An attack of shyness had seized her,—a dread of dancing with strangers, a conviction that she would be unable to think of a word to say; worst of all, the certainty that she was hopelessly awkward and that Alan must repent of having invited her to be his partner,—for had not Evelyn once criticized her carriage and her mode of dancing? Jean ought to have been well used to cousinly frankness, yet now she could not help drawing Carol aside and asking anxiously: "Do *you* think I hop so dreadfully when I dance? Evelyn says I do. She says I'm so tall I can't help being awkward."

"That's all perfect nonsense, Jean!" exclaimed Carol. "You hold yourself finely now, and you never hop a particle—I cured you of that long ago. Now, Little Sister, don't get any goosey notions about yourself, for you look as lovely as a lemon-blossom, which is more complimentary than it sounds."

Very blossom-like she looked, the slender girl, all in white. Now that she was comforted, thoughts of self took wings, and by the time the Armstrongs' young friends had assembled she had forgotten all else in the charm of the scene around her: the quaint colonial rooms all abloom with flowers, the girls in their delicately tinted gowns, the light and loveliness on every side. She was still under the spell when the musicians struck up their opening strains, and Jack claimed her for the first waltz.

At ten o'clock the music sounded for the cotillion and the gayest part of the evening began. The leaders had a merry time of it issuing their commands, and Jean, with a long red ribbon for reins, was made to drive four boys abreast, to meet and take for partners the girls driven by Douglas from the opposite end of the room. Alas, the girls were but a trio, and it fell to Jack's lot to be the unlucky member of the four-in-hand, left partnerless and alone! But his triumph came in the "Candle figure," when, though blindfolded, he blew out the light with one mighty puff, and Betty the candle-bearer descended from the chair on which she had been mounted, to dance with him.

Like a bit of Springtime was the pretty "Garland figure," where the girls, two and two, held chains of daffodils for the boys to march beneath. In another, June herself

seemed to have come. High screens were set up, covered with green crape paper, out of which blossomed posies ready for the button-holes. The stems were held by girls hidden behind the screens, and whenever a bouquet was taken a flower-fairy appeared, breaking her way through the green wall. Douglas gathered a rose and drew Cecily with it; and when Court plucked a spray of his own orange-blossoms, forth stepped Carol to be his partner.

The hours of that evening might have been stolen out of fairyland. How swiftly they glided by! How soon it was all over! The last carriage had rolled away, and around the fireside the young people of the house-party clustered, laden with favors, a flower-hat on each girlish head, and a flock of butterflies, their wings sparkling with diamond dust, poisoning on the pretty dresses. Instead of the brilliant dance-music there sounded only the strains of the wind-harp in the chimney.

"I know what Veronica really did with her voice," said Court. "She left it to you, Carol."

"And it had to be kept in storage in the chimney a whole century, waiting for me," Carol replied. "That's why it's degenerated so."

"You're wrong there," said he. "It's only grown richer and sweeter with age, like a vio-

lin.” She dropped him a curtsy that would have done credit to her ancestress.

The clock on the stairs chimed a warning to the loiterers to leave the fireside. Jean peeped into the chimney before she turned away. “I wish I could see you, you cunning little sprite up there!” she called. “And I wish you’d tell me what you’re singing about!”

“It’s singing an ode on the way Miss Frances and I made things hum to-night,” said Howard.

“And *I* think,” said his sister, “it’s also trying to coax the house-party all to come back again some day.”

CHAPTER VI

AN ILL WIND

“**T**HERE! That’s copied, and ready for your majesty to sign.” Cecily passed across the table to Jean a sheet of legal cap containing the Queen’s summons copied in the secretary’s clear hand.

On Saturday, May 15th, the Order of the Silver Sword will hold a business meeting for the election of officers for the coming year. The meeting will be held in Castle Afterglow at 4 P.M. and will be followed by a tea.

Jean read the royal order aloud, and heated her stick of silvery sealing wax. She rubbed a heavy daub of wax at the foot of the document, stamped it with Veronica’s amethyst seal, and held up for Cecily’s admiration the paper adorned with a silver disk bearing the intertwined *C* and *V*.

“Didn’t that come out finely! I’m going to take it with me and show it to Mother. She’s never seen any of my proclamations. Oh, dear! it’s time to go, and my hat is n’t on yet!”

Jean must indeed make haste if she were to

join Fräulein Bunsen and her party of Hazelhurst girls, bound for a day in the city, and not lose her fortnightly visit to her father and mother. Five minutes of frantic bustle followed, interspersed with groans of, "Where *are* my gloves? What on earth did I do with my purse? *Did* you see my Cicero anywhere? I must study on the train!"

With the aid of her calm and practical secretary the lost articles were found, and the erratic and dreamy leader of the battle maids took leave of Cecily, with whom she shared Castle Afterglow, the cosy room at the end of West Wing.

Good-by, then, until Monday, to Hazelhurst Hall. By noon Fräulein Bunsen had handed Jean over to the maid who had come to meet the train, and a little later the happy girl was at home again in the bright and sunny apartment looking out over Central Park.

"My little girlie! Is she really here at last! I've been watching for her for nearly an hour!" The sweet invalid mother had started from her lounge by the window to welcome her tall daughter.

"The train was terribly late!" said Jean. "Carissima mia, how are you, darling? Oh, I've oceans to tell you!"

"And I'm longing to hear!"

Soon they were sitting side by side, hand

locked in hand, and Jean was pouring out the news of the last two weeks to the mother who was so precious that English endearments had failed, and the last pet name had been stolen from the sweet Italian tongue. What a happy difference there was between this year and last! A year ago her father and mother had been far away in Brazil, but now they were back again in the northern world: henceforth New York, not Rio Janeiro, was Jean's home.

"Now, I'll show you something pretty!" said Jean. Off she flew to her satchel, and returned with the royal document, which received all the admiration that the Queen's heart could wish.

"We're going to make a regular celebration of it," said Jean. "And we want to have Carol come out for it and spend Sunday. Do you mind if I go and see her about it this afternoon? I won't be long."

"I'm afraid, darling, Carol will not be at the meeting next week."

Jean looked at her mother with startled eyes. Something in the gently spoken words filled her with apprehension.

"Is she ill?" The question came quick and sharp, with sudden dread.

"No, darling, but she is needed at home just now."

"Mother! I know something's happened,

and you 're keeping it from me! What is it? Tell me!"

"Yes, dear, something *has* happened, and the Armstrongs are in a great deal of trouble. Do you know what a business failure means?"

"Of course, I do. It's when a man loses all his money. Oh, Mother, they haven't *failed*, have they? Carol won't be *poor*, will she? Oh, Mother, do hurry and tell me!"

"Listen, darling, quietly. You know Mr. Armstrong has not been at all well, lately, and so he has had to leave too much responsibility on his partner, Mr. Fletcher. And so, when he had to go to Florida last winter, he left everything in his partner's hands. And Mr. Fletcher took advantage of his absence to do some things which he knew Mr. Armstrong would disapprove of,—things that a high-minded man would not consider upright and honorable. And poor Mr. Armstrong trusted him so completely that he did not suspect anything was wrong until a few weeks ago. Since then he has been trying every means to save his business from ruin, but in spite of his efforts the firm has failed."

"I don't understand," broke in Jean.
"What *things* did Mr. Fletcher do, Mother?"

"I only know that every one says his folly caused the failure, and that Mr. Armstrong has acted nobly and honorably, and intends to give

up his private property to pay his debts. But he will be left with scarcely anything."

"Oh, poor darling Carol!" cried Jean. "Mother, can't *we* help them? Can't *I* do something for Carol? Oh, Mother, I *must* help her! What can I do?"

"Not much just now, Jean. But there is one thing you can do better than any one."

"*I?* What, Mother?"

"Go and comfort her right away."

Jean's eyes had grown very dark and deep. "Mother," she said solemnly, "you know I love my Carol with all my heart, but I could never say anything to comfort her now. This trouble is too awful!"

"No, Jean. It will comfort her just to know that her little sister wishes to help her. Just go and tell her that you love her more than ever, now that she is suffering."

"*That* wouldn't do any good!" said Jean despairingly. "We ought to *do* something!" But when Mrs. Lennox asked: "Where is the sword Caritas now, dear?" she buried her face on her Mother's shoulder. A moment later she started to her feet. "I'll go this minute, Mother! She'll find out how I love her, anyway."

Her mother detained the eager girl until she had had her luncheon. But early in the afternoon Jean was on her way to Carol's

home. As the car carried her along, the whole story of their friendship passed before her mind. The first year at school, Jean, shy and homesick, had idolized from a distance that exalted person, Carol Armstrong, president of the seniors, the leader and favorite of Hazelhurst Hall. But there came a time when Carol found out that little Jean Lennox needed her friendship. That was the day when an act of thoughtless unkindness had wounded Jean's sensitive nature to the quick; and as she sat lonely and miserable in her room Carol had come and comforted her, taking the suffering girl right into her warm, tender heart. From that day they had been "sisters"; the sunshine of love and sympathy had made life bright for Jean, and the link that bound the two girls together time had only served to make more firm and fast.

And now the time had come for Jean to comfort Carol. But how was she to do it? What could she say? Stronger every minute grew the dread of meeting her friend, with this dark cloud of trouble as a barrier between them. For Carol could not be the same! The light-hearted girl, cheery as the sunlight, would not be there. Jean was trembling, and her hands were icy, when she stood at last in the Armstrongs' vestibule awaiting the answer to her ring. When the well-known figure of the butler

appeared at the door, his gloomy countenance said plainly, "My days in this place are numbered"; and he answered her timid inquiry in a grave undertone as if there were illness in the house. Jean heard an unfamiliar voice in the drawing-room and drew back.

"Miss Carol's in the parlor," said the butler. "Will you please go into the library a minute and wait for her, Miss Lennox?"

Feeling wretchedly out of place Jean stole off to the library and stood by the window looking out absently, trying to still the nervous beating of her heart. A quick, light step that she knew well made her turn.

"Why, Little Sister!" The same bright, musical voice, full of glad welcome! Jean started forward, and in a flash Carol, the same cheery, warm-hearted Carol, had thrown her arms around her, and the dreaded meeting was bereft of all its terrors.

"Dear Little Sister, how sweet of you to come!"

"Oh, Carol, darling! Mother told me!" Jean whispered, her cheek against her friend's. Then she looked anxiously at Carol. Yes, a change had come. The poor girl was very pale, and the dark shadows under her eyes told of sad days and wakeful nights; but she met Jean's troubled gaze with a brave smile.

"Why, Queenie! What a woe-begone ex-

pression!" Playfully, as if it were Jean who was to be consoled, Carol took her face between her hands.

"Oh, Carol,—I heard to-day—and I wanted to come—I—Oh, I love you so!" It was most unregal, but suddenly Jean felt her lips begin to quiver. Then to her own dismay she fairly burst out sobbing! And then, for all the world one would have thought it was last year, and they were back in Castle Afterglow. All at once Jean found herself beside Carol on the sofa, her head on the comforting shoulder, the sisterly arms around her. And there was Carol, as if she had never a trouble of her own, laughing cheerily.

"Dearie me! dearie me! The Queen of the Silver Sword came to comfort the Alruna, and now the Alruna has to comfort the Queen!"

Jean looked up, and in spite of herself almost laughed through her tears over her own mortifying conduct. "Oh, Carol! I didn't mean to behave so disgracefully! The idea of my boo-hooing like a baby when I came to cheer you up! But—you look so worn-out and pale."

"Bless your heart, childie, what color would you expect me to be? I've hardly slept a wink for three nights! But that is n't going to hurt me. There now, Queenie dear, don't cry any

more over your Big Sister. She's going to weather the storm."

"But it's so dreadful for you!" said Jean forlornly. "You've had everything so beautiful around you all your life."

"Then I'll have some beautiful things to look back upon," said Carol. "And, dear me, Jeanie, before you know it, you'll see me setting up a tea-room and making my fame and fortune with Veronica's fruit-cake! Why, it isn't going to hurt great strong *me* one bit to be poor! Not any more than it hurts thousands of other girls. It's my dear father, and my little mother, that I'm thinking of. They're the ones my heart aches for." Resolutely cheerful as she had shown herself, a look of suffering came into her face. "You know, dear," she added gently, "we must give up our home."

"This beautiful house?"

"Yes, and Wyndgarth, too, as soon as we can sell it."

"Then, Carol, *you* must come and live with *us*!" cried Jean impetuously.

"Oh, Jean, I could n't! Mother and Father will need me more than ever now. I can only leave them to take some position. Father has been ill so much lately, you know, I don't dare to think what the effect of all this frightful

strain may be!" The sadness had deepened in her face, but suddenly it gave place to an almost triumphant look.

"But it is n't *all* dreadful!" she said earnestly. "There 's a bright, good side, too. My father has failed, but he has failed honorably. Oh, Jean, he 's been so splendid and noble from first to last! I 'm proud to be his daughter. I 've loved him dearly all my life, but I love and honor him more than ever now! And is n't it good to know that, even if we have to lose everything, nobody else will have to suffer? Father will be able to pay all his debts, every one of them! You know, this trouble would never have come at all if the man whom Father trusted, whom he had helped, who owed everything to him, had n't been false to his trust."

"I know!" Jean interrupted hotly. "That wicked man—"

"Don't let me talk about him, Jean,—I must n't," said Carol in a low voice. The fire had kindled in her eyes; her hand was clenched; but she set her lips firmly, forcing back the passionate words that were burning to be spoken. Poor girl! No wonder she looked worn! Midnight had found her pacing back and forth in the loneliness of her room, battling with the fierce storm of indignation that had swept up almost beyond control.

Jean took her friend's hand in both of hers

and held it lovingly; it was all the comfort she could give. "Carolie, you spoke just now about taking a position. What did you mean?"

"I mean I shall have to find some sort of work just as soon as I can. Howard and Alan and I must be bread-winners for the family. I'm ready to grind away at anything, Jean,—I don't care what the work is. A born jack-of-all-trades like me ought to be able to get *some* position before long. I wish I had time to fit myself for teaching, but I'll have to be earning *now*."

"And you were going abroad to study music!" sighed Jean. "Must you give all that up?"

"Oh, yes, that's all over with," answered Carol. "And good riddance to old Deutschland, I say! I'm sure a lonely island of a daughter, entirely surrounded by brothers, had much better stay home and take care of her family!"

"But you love music so! You're a regular musical genius!"

"You mean *you* 're a regular *romancer*," Carol corrected. "I'm afraid love is *deaf* as well as blind. Don't look so tragic, Queenie. I can do a little warbling to myself while I'm making our ancestral cake for the market. And maybe I *shall* make something out of my

music yet. Here 's an idea!" she added merrily. "You write a volume of songs and I 'll compose the airs, and we 'll publish it together and make our united fortunes. There 's Mother calling me! Yes, Sweetheart Mother, I 'm coming! I must go back to the drawing-room, Jean. Our lawyer 's there."

"I must go anyway," said Jean. "I just came in for a minute, because I wanted you to know—Oh, Carolie, I didn't act a bit the way I meant to! Here you are so brave and splendid! And I just *cried!* I 'm dreadfully ashamed of myself! I wanted to—to—"

"I know what you came to do, and you 've done it!" said Carol, kissing her. "You don't know what a comfort and help it is, Little Sister, just to feel your love."

CHAPTER VII

ELECTION DAY

SO Wyndgarth was to pass out of the Armstrong family which had held it ever since the days of the gallant major! Within a few months it would have to be sold. Meanwhile here was a little author writing its annals while her heart ached over its downfall. Jean was busy every spare minute finishing and polishing the romance of the tory's granddaughter and her Continental soldier. Evelyn had already triumphantly proclaimed that her Indian tale was completed.

At last the day arrived when the aspirants for literary fame were to hand in their stories. With hopes and fears the carefully copied manuscripts were presented to Miss Lee, the teacher of English, and the whole faculty sat in judgment upon them. In the evening all the members of Hazelhurst assembled in the school-room to hear the stories read aloud, and to learn which author had gained the prize. Many were the guesses as to who the winner would be.

Miss Carlton made a speech to the rows of girls at their desks. The young writers deserved much credit, she said; the tales were all good and well worthy of a place in the school paper, the "*Hazelnut*," in which they were to be printed. "The judges have found it hard to choose between three of the stories," she went on. "These are *On the Track of King Philip*, by Margaret Evans; *The Maids of the Mayflower*, by Grace Gardiner, and *A Daughter of '76*, by Jean Lennox."

Jean and Hilda were desk-mates, and each started at the name. Hilda squeezed her Queen's hand, and Jean felt her heart begin to beat fast and the warm blood surge up into her cheeks.

"It has finally been decided to award the prize to Jean Lennox." These were the words that came to the ears of the blushing girl at Hilda's side, and they were followed by a burst of clapping that turned the quiet school-room into the noisiest of places. How the battle maids pounded! Their hands were red and tingling long before they were ready to give over. Hilda found the slapping of palm against palm altogether too weak an expression of her enthusiasm, and longed to stand up and hurrah. She was one of the defeated, to be sure, but to see her Queen bear off the prize was all the triumph that she asked. Evelyn

and Betty sat directly in front of Hilda and Jean. Betty, applauding with all her might, glanced at Evelyn's hands and saw them lying folded in her lap.

"Why don't you clap?" she whispered.

"There 's noise enough without me," replied Evelyn, but she roused herself to give three limp pats. Then she folded her arms and leaned back in her chair, while Betty wound up the plaudits of the school with half a dozen explosive claps after everyone else had ceased.

"Come forward, Jean," called Miss Carlton, when there was silence once more.

Jean rose like one in a dream and walked up the long aisle to the platform.

"Jean, I congratulate you! You have worked hard and the prize is well earned," said Miss Carlton. She placed in the girl's hands a handsomely bound volume of Browning's poems. Jean could never afterwards recall just how she thanked Miss Carlton. Indeed the discomfoting question would arise, had she remembered to say anything at all in that joyous, dreamlike moment! Yet, however few were her words, her glowing face spoke for her as she received her trophy.

Down the aisle she came laden with her prize. Cecily reached out and pinched her arm affectionately as she passed, and Frances hallooed in an undertone, "Hip, hip, hooray!"

Jean slipped into her seat and examined her treasure. Her cheeks began to cool as she pored over the volume, but only to grow hot again when Miss Carlton proceeded to read aloud *A Daughter of '76*.

The hearty applause that it won showed that Jean had successfully carried her schoolmates back to the stirring days of which she told.

The other stories had their turns also, and Jean clapped with all her might over Evelyn's *Catherine, the Indians' Captive*. Her cousin had told the tale of the old fort in irreproachable rhetoric; she had not forgotten a single fact any more than she had forgotten a single punctuation mark, and yet something was lacking.

"She didn't make Catherine sing worth a cent," Frances whispered to Cecily. "And her Indians were as stiff as pokers! I'd like to have let a nest of hornets loose among them to make them war-whoop a little!"

Jean was more appreciative. "Your story was fine, Ev,—splendid!" she said, patting her cousin on the shoulder. Evelyn answered by an impatient jerk, but Jean persisted. "That description of the fort and the hill was ever so pretty. I felt as if I was right back there again."

Evelyn half turned her head. "You know

you don't mean that. You 're just saying it for politeness," she muttered.

Jean flushed and bit her lip. She made no further attempt at consolation and her face was overcast as she listened to the rest of the stories.

The reading over, the girls clustered around the prize winner.

"Congratulations! The idea of your beating the seniors and all, you little soph!"

"Jean, your story was simply fine! I don't see how you did it!"

"It was perfectly splendid! I was so excited!"

"The judges decided right. Yours was the best of any."

They patted her on the back and showered congratulations. Margaret and Grace shook hands heartily with her and told her she deserved the prize. As for the members of the Order, ten of them marched up and down the corridor, chorusing:

"Who are we? Who are we?"

We are the battle maids! Rah for C. V.!

Rah, rah, rah, S. S. Queen!

Give three cheers for author Jean!"

The eleventh maid-of-honor did not join in the march or in the chorus.

The news of the successful début made by the Daughter of '76 was sent at once to Carol and brought in return a letter and a parcel. Jean found the parcel to contain a white satin pennant with *Caritas et Veritas* gilded upon it in antique script.

"Dear rising Jean-ius," wrote Carol.

"This is to send you a string of congratulations long enough to reach round the whole solar system and tie in a bow! Also to give me the luxury of saying 'I told you so!' I did tell you so, didn't I, unbelieving Queenie? The Alruna turned out a true prophetess when she said you would carry off the prize over the heads of Margaret and Grace and the whole constellation of literary stars. And when you are the leading novelist of the twentieth century I shall still say 'I told you so!' and proudly point to myself as the Big Sister of the world-renowned Jean Lennox. My highest ambition is to be your private secretary when you reel off a volume a week! I'm practising up for it now. I've begun to study shorthand.

"We moved out to Wyndgarth day before yesterday, and on receipt of your news I ran up the Stars and Stripes to the top of the flagpole. Poor Old Glory! It has been at half-mast lately; but now you have brought new honors to the dear old house to comfort it for having to be sold. I also *ran up* a Silver Sword flag (on the sewing-machine). I found a piece of white satin and I thought a pennant would do as a substitute for the chief councillor on Election

Day. In return you must send me a copy of your story and I shall keep it till I am a daughter of 76 (years old).

“With love and best wishes to the Order, and three times three cheers for the author-queen, whose pen is as mighty as her sword.

“Your devoted

“CAROL.”

The next day was that appointed for the Silver Sword election, and close on four o'clock a knot of girls waited outside of Castle Afterglow for the door to open, while inside Cecily copied the last words of her *minutes*, and Jean took her crown from its white box. It was a beautiful coronet of frosted silver, and in front were engraved, in a monogram, the letters C and V. The girls at camp had given it to her the year before. This meeting of the Order would, she told herself, be the last at which she would ever wear it, for to-day a new queen would be chosen. Jean looked at the crown lovingly; then she went to the table where the secretary was at work and placed it on Cecily's head.

The Princess of the Scroll looked up with a laugh. “What are you doing that for?” she asked. “That crown does n't belong to me and never will. You 're going to wear it yourself a whole year more!”

“Not much! No danger I 'll be re-elected!”

protested Jean. "Hold up your head, St. Cecilia! Wait till I fluff out your halo and make you look *booful*,—there! Now see how becoming the crown is to you! I know whom I'm going to vote for!" She merrily tweaked a lock of the soft blond hair,—“St. Cecilia's halo” the girls called it.

Cecily removed the crown, set it on Jean's head and held it firmly in place. “There!” said she. “That 's where it belongs and that 's where it 's going to stay, and I know whom I'm going to vote for! Me a queen! I'd like to see myself!”

“Well, you will, Queen Cecilia,” Jean assured her, turning to the mirror to straighten her necktie, which was as usual in the neighborhood of her ear. What nonsense it was for dear, ridiculous, flattering Cecily to talk as she did about her being re-elected! And yet how beautiful it would be to find that, after all, her subjects loved her enough to—

Here Jean gave herself a reproving slap on each cheek, and told herself that the good of the Order was what she ought to be thinking about, and that gentle, sunny tempered Cecily was the ideal person to wear the crown.

Meantime in their room on the floor above, Thekla Hoffman was retying her hair ribbon, and Evelyn sat at her writing table, her elbow on her open Cicero, her forehead on her hand.

"It's nearly four. Let's go down," said Thekla, giving her satin bow a last satisfied pat.

"I don't think I'll go to the meeting,—my head aches too hard," replied her room-mate.

"You poor old girl! Is it so bad?" asked Thekla, laying her hand softly on the hot forehead. "But you mustn't miss the election. It won't hurt you just to come down and vote, will it? Maybe it will make you feel better."

"No, it will make it worse. I don't care if it is the election,—I'm not going. My head's just splitting!"

"Poor dear! Well, if you won't go, you'd better lie down and go to sleep. Don't study any more, whatever you do." She pulled Evelyn's arm away from her Cicero, and closed the book. "I know what's the matter with you, child. You study entirely too hard! And there's no sense in killing yourself, for you leave the rest nowhere, you and Jean."

"It's too near prize day to take it easy," said Evelyn.

"Prizes! prizes! You never think of anything but prizes!" said Thekla. "I'm so glad I'm a nice, lazy thing. As long as I can squeak through my exams, I'm satisfied. There is n't any use in my trying for anything more, anyhow. You and Jean sweep up all the honors between you, and there's nothing

left for ordinary mortals. You'll win the geometry prize if you don't study a word more from now to Commencement."

"Thank you—but I want a whole loaf or none. I hate just getting half," returned Evelyn.

"Well, you'll probably get two-thirds of the prizes. Will that satisfy you?" asked Thekla, laughing.

Evelyn was silent. Her thoughts had flown back to her home, and Commencement time a year ago, when she had carried off all the honors of her class at the Academy. Dear old Academy! She had scorned it as old-fashioned, and had coaxed to be sent to Hazelhurst; but now she felt a sudden wish to fly back to it again. A moody girl, and proud and sensitive as well, she had never been popular with her schoolmates there. Yet as the finest scholar she had been the idol of the teachers, and prophecies that she would be the Hazelhurst valedictorian had attended her departure. How long ago it seemed, since she had said good-by to the Academy and set out for Roslyn Heights, wondering whether she would find that queer little cousin of hers grown much queerer in the lapse of years!

"There! It's striking four!" said Thekla. "I wish you didn't feel too badly to come. It's a shame for you to lose it all—elections

are such fun. And you 're the Queen's cousin, —you ought to vote for her. I 'm going to."

"My vote would n't make any difference one way or the other," replied Evelyn. "No, I 'm going to lie down till my head stops pounding. I just want to be let alone."

"All right then. I 'll tuck you up and cologne a handkerchief for you." Thekla made Evelyn as comfortable as she could, emptied the last drops of her cologne over her handkerchief for the aching forehead, darkened the room and turned to leave. "Good-by! Go to sleep, and I 'll tell you all about it when I come back. But it 's mean you can't be there."

But Evelyn did not go to sleep. She flounced about restlessly. "No, I won't go down! I won't! I 'm not going to vote," she told herself. "Of course Jean 'll be elected—she always gets everything. I won't vote for her anyhow."

"Why not? Because her story won the prize?" said a little voice that even Thekla would not have heard had she still been in the room.

"It has n't anything to do with the story," declared Evelyn. "But she 'll be spoiled if everybody keeps bowing down to her. It is n't good to have too much power. No, I 'm *not* going down."

"Yes, you *are* going down, if you know what 's good for you," the little voice replied. "Go right straight down to Castle Afterglow this minute: it won't injure your head a bit. You know she 's the proper person for queen. Vote for her, and you 'll be doing yourself a better turn even than you are doing *her*."

"I can't! I just can't," declared Evelyn.

"You mean you *won't*,—you just *won't*!" said that contradictory voice; but Evelyn ended the argument with a third emphatic "I can't!"

Thekla ran down stairs, to find the portal of Castle Afterglow wide open and the battle maids gathered for their conclave.

"Where 's Evelyn?" asked Jean.

"She has a headache, and does n't feel like coming down," Thekla explained. "It would do her good if she only knew it, but you can't stir her."

"Oh, bother! We can't have the election without her!" said Jean. "She 'll have to come down,—it won't hurt her, just for a few minutes. I 'm going up to make her."

"You won't succeed," Thekla warned her. "She says she wants to be let alone, and when she says that she *means* it. She 's going to take a nap."

"But she must vote. It wouldn't be fair to leave her out. I 'll *make* her come down," said

the determined queen. Off she ran, but returned discomfited and alone. "I knocked twice, and she did n't answer. Then I went in and spoke to her, but she would n't say a word. She was lying there with the quilt over her ears, but she could n't have gone to sleep quite so quickly. She must be mad at something."

"Evelyn's mad and I am glad," remarked Frances. "We'll have a great deal more fun without her. When she's cranky she spoils everything."

"What's the matter with her lately?" asked Betty. "Sometimes she's just as nice as she can be, and then she gets the grumps for nothing at all."

"Oh, she gets *fits*," said Thekla.

"When she's good, she's very, very good, and when she's bad she's *horrid*!" declared Jean, her limited stock of patience completely exhausted.

"When she's good she's only *pretty* good, you mean," corrected Hilda.

"And she treats *me* to all the *horrid*," added Jean. "I can't make her out! For weeks we'll *gee* well enough, and then she'll suddenly turn around and say something that makes me perfectly furious! We got along finely all the fall, and then after Christmas she'd hardly speak to me for days. And she had another fit at Easter. Then she smoothed

down, and she's been ever so nice till just this last week, and now she's crankier than ever!"

"I'd like to shake her for the way she behaves to you!" cried Cecily, who could be exceedingly warlike when disloyalty appeared in the camp.

"I think she's grumpy because she studies so hard she tires herself out," said Thekla. "I notice her fits come on when she's worrying about exams or prizes. She can't stand not being a hundred in everything."

"She needn't worry about prizes,—she's the brightest girl in the class!" said Jean frankly.

"The rest of us are much obliged to you," remarked Maud Perry.

"There's *somebody* brighter," said Hilda. "She's mad because her story didn't take the prize,—that's what's the matter with her."

"I think that's it," Thekla agreed. "But really, girls, she's ever so nice between fits. We get on like sugar and cream most of the time!"

"And *we* get on like red pepper and vinegar," laughed Jean. "I'm the red pepper! But my stars, girls! We're cracking our silver swords nicely on poor old Ev! *Mine's* in splinters! Let's stop talking about her fits, and start the meeting. And we'll pet her out

of her huff and her headaches, afterwards. Now come to order!" And Jean hammered on the table, with a ruler for a gavel.

The Queen opened the meeting with a speech from the throne,—in other words from her wicker arm-chair, and when she had finished she presented the new flag. "We 're all very sorry, I know, because our Alruna can't be here to-day," said she. "And she 's sorry too, but she sends us this in her place,—she made it herself." Jean unfurled the satin pennant. "Was n't it lovely of her to think of us, with all the trouble she 's in!"

"It was just like her," said Cecily. "She never stops to think of herself,—it 's always somebody else!"

"Yes, was n't it *Carol* all over!" agreed Betty. "What a beauty of a pennant it is!"

"I wish we could do something for her," sighed Jean, when the gift had received its meed of praise. "Is n't there anything we could give her?"

"Could n't we give her something handsome in silver?" Mildred Carrington suggested.

"I saw a simply gorgeous salad dish at Tiffany's when I went to New York last Saturday," said Blanche Humphreys.

"She is n't going to be married, you goosey ganders!" scoffed Phyllis. "She 's only going to take a situation, poor dear! And of course

they 'll have to move into a little bit of a flat or something, and they won't have any room for silver! I 'm bankrupt anyway!"

"So am I," groaned Adela Mears.

"My allowance all went in Silver Sword *finés* and ice cream sodas!" Frances lamented.

"Thirty-five cents wouldn't buy her anything but postage stamps," said Betty ruefully, shaking the treasurer's lean bag. "Oh, girls, could n't we get up a *memorial* for her?" she added, her face brightening. "I mean a kind of a letter to show her how much we care for her and appreciate all she's done for us, and how sorry we are she can't be here to-day!"

"You mean a *testimonial*, not a *memorial*," Sydney Thorne corrected, laughing.

"I think that's the best thing we could do till these bankrupt members get their next allowances," said Jean. "She'd care more about knowing we all love her than for any present, I'm sure."

"Then I move that Cecily writes the letter and we all sign it," said Hilda. "Paint a sword and shield on it, Cece, and put in fancy capitals, and make it look pretty. And tell her she's the dearest thing living, and that the meetings are no good without her, and we'll think of her every time we look at the pennant!"

The motion was seconded and carried by a unanimous vote.

Cecily then read her minutes and followed them with a review of the work accomplished since the spring of a year ago.

The Silver Sword had two protégées. One was Stella Weeks, an orphan girl from Halcyon, to whom the campers had played good fairies the summer before, and whom Mrs. Brook had finally taken to live with her as a second daughter. The girls of the camp and the whole Order had bound themselves to aid in her support, and it was to raise money for her benefit that the battle maids had appeared as witches and warlocks in a Hallowe 'en play written by their Queen.

The second protégée was seven-year-old Nanno Donohoe, a blue-eyed Irish colleen from the New York "east side," who, as the camp baby, had been almost hopelessly spoiled last summer. The Order had held a sale of home-made valentines just before the fourteenth of February to provide Nanno with a fresh wardrobe, and they were ready to complete the spoiling process by carrying her with them to Halcyon for the coming vacation.

Altogether the Order had a notable record. Before it could decide upon future work the election had to take place.

Hilda had charge of the polls, and she placed

the scrap-basket on the table as a ballot box. The voters dropped their slips of paper into it and waited in suspense while she counted them.

"It 's come out just the way I wanted it to!" she announced at last. "Her majesty is re-elected! She 's Queen for the coming year!" Jean jumped clear out of her chair. The others clapped and cheered.

"Girls, how perfectly dear of you to choose me again! But I should think you 'd have wanted to get rid of me as quick as you could! I 'm sure I 've made dozens of blunders!" cried the happy Queen. At this there was a disrespectful chorus of "Fishing! Fishing!"

"You never made a blunder that I can remember," said Hilda. "Now, sh! Silence! Hush up! You 're the noisest queen and court I ever heard of, always interrupting! Your majesty would have been unanimously elected if you hadn't gone and thrown in a vote for Cecily! Cecily Brook is re-elected Princess of the Scroll by a majority of eleven! I have one vote,—much obliged, Cece!"

Hilda paused to join in the clapping and then proceeded. "Betty Randolph is re-elected Princess of the Treasure,—also by a majority of eleven to one. *She* voted for Thek. Their royal highnesses have spoiled their unanimous elections just like the Queen! Now girls, let 's give our re-elected three cheers!"

The cheering reached even to the room where Evelyn lay wide awake.

“Now let ’s drink their healths in lemonade, and the Alruna’s too,” said Phyllis, casting a yearning eye at the large glass pitcher on the table and the plate of macaroons beside it.

For the next few minutes the lemonade flowed freely, and the macaroon dish repeatedly made the rounds.

“I wonder if Evelyn could drink any lemonade,” said Jean as the meeting broke up. “I’ll take her some anyway.” She filled a glass and went upstairs with Thekla. Listening at the door they heard a sigh or two, and went in.

“Ev, I ’m so sorry you have a headache and could n’t come,” Jean began.

“Congratulations,” returned her cousin abruptly.

“Why, how did you know?” asked Jean.

“I knew you ’d be elected,—everyone did,” replied Evelyn, with an odd look. Whether her mood were friendly or offish Jean could not tell.

“Yes, they elected all three of us over again,” said Jean, seating herself on the bed. “But I ’m terribly sorry your head ’s so bad. I came up to see how you were, before.”

“I know it,” Evelyn answered shortly. Jean did not look surprised.

"I've brought you up some lemonade," said she, offering the glass.

"Thank you very much, Jean, but I really could n't take it with a headache."

"Oh, yes you could,—just a sip. It's so nice and cold, and you feel so hot," urged Jean, laying her hand on the girl's cheek.

"No, I don't want any." Evelyn pushed the glass away peevishly.

"Oh, try some, child! It won't hurt you a snap," said Thekla.

"We'll leave it here and maybe she'll take it by and by," suggested Jean. But Evelyn shut her eyes. "I don't want anything but to be let alone," she answered wearily.

The sympathetic Order would not leave her alone, however. In came Frances with the cake dish. "Stuff a headache and starve a fever! that's my prescription," said she. "Have some macaroons? They're daisy!" But Evelyn waved her impatiently away.

"She can't eat macaroons with a headache, Frisk!" exclaimed Jean with some scorn.

"I could, if I had twenty headaches," remarked the Mouse, nibbling one of the rejected dainties.

"Well, good-by, Ev. I do hope you'll feel better soon," said Jean. "Come Frisky, we'll make her head worse if we stay here chattering." She slipped away.

“Call her back,” whispered the little voice.

“Shall I?” thought Evelyn.

Frances was contemplating the figure on the bed. “Oh, Ev!” she suddenly exclaimed. “You look just like Catherine singing on the woodpile!”

“Leave me alone, can’t you?” snapped the sufferer. That poor, little defeated story was a sore subject, and Frances’s mode of alluding to the captive lady was hardly flattering to her dignity.

“I ’ll scoot,” said the Mouse, innocent of malicious intent. “Are you sure you don’t want that lemonade?”

“I ’ve said so till I ’m tired!”

“All right then,—I can stand a third glass. Bye, bye! Ah, it ’s good!” Frances departed sipping, and Evelyn turned her face to the wall and felt that the climax of her injuries had been reached.

Thekla’s theory seemed to be the right one, however. Evelyn’s ill humor came and went in fits. When Jean asked her next morning how she felt, she answered, “Better, thank you. How ’s your majesty?” as pleasantly as if they had never had a difference. And in spite of another headache she was present at the next meeting of the Silver Sword, hastily convened as the result of fresh tidings from Carol.

News had come that clouded Jean’s face and

made her declare, "We *must* do *something* to help her!" But her disconsolate look when the meeting was over told that the something had not yet been found. Frances, it is true, had been fertile in suggestions. "Let's hire that old lawyer-man Carol's going to work for," she proposed, as they adjourned. "Let's get him to come up to Halcyon and make our wills for us; then she'll have to come too to shorthand them, and once we've got her there we'll keep her."

"If we can't find a way to save her from that horrid city this summer we might as well throw our silver swords into the ash-can for good!" declared Jean. She sat down at her desk and unburdened her soul in a letter to Douglas, before engaging in a tussle with her geometry.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LEAGUE FOUNDED

“**D**EAR DOUGLAS: Last Saturday we had our election day, and guess who is to be Queen this year! Why, that crazy, absent-minded girl, Jean Lennox! Yes, they elected Cecily and Betty and my wild-headed self all right over again. The meeting went off finely, but we missed our dear Alruna fearfully.

“Oh, Douglas, my Carol is in worse trouble than ever! Her father is ill again—just what she was afraid would happen. They have sold their city house, and are staying out at Wyndgarth now. But if they can’t find anybody to buy the homestead soon, they will sell it at auction, and all the beautiful old furniture and everything. I don’t see how Carol *can* write such brave, cheery letters. They have no servant now, except their dear old Aggie and her husband who just insist on staying with them. Carol is very busy helping to take care of her father, but as soon as he is well enough for her to leave him, what do you think she is going to do? Their lawyer has offered her a place in his office, and so she is going to grind away all summer in the sizzling heat down town. Just think of it! A girl who simply adores music and art and everything beautiful! But that

is n't the worst. She says she'll have to stay in the city all summer to be near her work. Isn't that awful? She will be ill herself next.

"We Silver Sworders have been racking our brains to think of some way to *make* her come up to Halcyon Lake this summer instead. If only this dreadful trouble had n't come, it would have been jollier than ever there this year. There'll be thirty of us Hazelhurst girls in camp. We thought of raising a fund to pay her way there, but Mother says she would be too proud to accept it. Some of the girls had a grand scheme for having her come up and give us all singing lessons, but she would see right through that. We can't think of any way to save her, but unless we *can* save her, she will simply kill herself slaving away in blazing New York.

"Oh, fiddle! There goes the study-hour bell, and I have pages of things to tell you. Well, good-by, from your affectionate and terrifically puzzled sister,

"JEAN LENNOX."

The answer to this wail came with unlooked-for promptness.

"DEAR JEAN: Glad to get your last letter, just received. Hooray for the Queen of the S. S.! It's great you're re-elected and Cecily and Betty too! It's awful the trouble the Armstrongs are in. I feel worst of all for Carol. I'm awfully sorry she has to go to work like that. Too bad you could n't hit on some way to get her up to Halcyon. I tell you what, Jean, whenever I think how she saved my life last

summer, and all she did for me, I feel as if I could never show her how grateful I am, not if I worked all my life for her. Here 's an idea. You won't let us fellows into the Order, but what do you say to forming a kind of league to stand by Carol and be on the lookout for a chance to help her? Make it a sort of annex to the Order. You four S. S. girls who were with her at Halcyon invite Jack and me to join, and see if we don't make things spin. Get in Jack's sister and Stella, too. And if the whole crowd of us can't do something worth while for Carol we might as well sell out. I've got to cram now, so good-by.

“Your affectionate brother,

“DOUGLAS GORDON.

“N. B. I've thought of a dandy name for the Annex. You know that ring you found in the buried treasure. How do you like calling it 'The League of the Signet Ring'?”

Douglas had indeed owed Carol a deep debt of gratitude since the day when he had nearly lost his life on the side of the great, bold mountain, the Gothics. Struck a fierce blow by the hand of the man who hated him, the lad had fallen down the slides, those terrible rocks on the side of the Gothics' steep incline; and the brave girl had risked her own life to descend the cliff and save him. She had found him dangerously hurt, and all night on the lonely mountain she had tended him till, in the morning, Court Hamilton and his rescue party had come to their relief. During the long illness

that followed, Carol had helped to nurse the suffering boy, and both she and Jean had given up weeks of their summer holiday to be with him until he was well again. And now here was Douglas ready to stand by Carol loyally.

Jean hurried to her three Halcyon comrades, Cecily, Betty and Frances, whom she found perched on the piazza rail, enjoying the leisure interval after luncheon. She read the letter aloud, and the trio took up the project with ardor.

"Good for Douglas! That's a fine idea!" said Cecily. "Indeed we ought to *sell out* if such a crowd of us could n't do something!"

"And that's such a splendid name for the league!" said Betty. "Won't it be jolly though, to have the boys in!"

"See if I don't make Jack work hard!" said Frances. "He's got to come up to time if he's in a society with *me!*"

"We must make Douglas the head of it, because he's the founder," said Jean. "And we'll keep it all a profound secret from Carol."

"Of course!" the others agreed.

"And we must think up some grand title for him," said Cecily.

"Let's have a Greek one," Jean proposed. "I'll write and ask him what's the Greek for governor, or general, or something."

"*I am the Alruna of this league!*" announced Frances, at which the others jeered.

"A frisky Mouse for a chief councillor!" laughed Jean. "Beautiful advice *you* 'll give!"

"You 'd better believe it will be beautiful," Frances assured her. "The older I grow the more I feel that *giving advice* is my true calling. I 'm going to write out a set of rules that Jack 'll be too lazy to keep, and every time he breaks one we 'll fine him, and that 'll fill up the treasury."

"Well," said Cecily, "I 'm going to make Court join too! I don't care if he *is* a high and mighty Yale man just ready to graduate! He ought to feel flattered that we care to invite him."

"Of course he ought!" said Jean. "And we must have him! He and Carol are *such* good friends! Write to Court and Jack to-day, Cece. We want to get things started right straight off."

"Yes, and I 'll write to Rose Hamilton and Stella, too," said Cecily. "Stella will be just delighted to have a chance to help along. She feels she owes such a lot to you and Carol! I 'll dash off my letters right away. *League of the Signet Ring!* Does n't that sound romantic!"

"League of the Signet Ring! What highfalutin thing is *that*, please?" asked Evelyn, who

was passing; and she stopped before them with a superior smile.

"It 's something *you* can't belong to," replied Frances, "because you are n't a Halcyonite!"

"I haven't the slightest ambition to belong to it, thank you," returned Evelyn. "I know Halcyon is the most wonderful place in the world, and nobody can be with you girls two minutes without hearing you rant about it. Switzerland was quite good enough for *me*, last year!"

"*Oo!* But the grapes are sour!" observed Frances, as Evelyn stalked away.

"I 'm afraid she 's hurt,—she 's so touchy!" said Jean, and she flew after her cousin. "It 's just a little annex to the Silver Sword, Evelyn, to let the boys in," she explained, and she described the plan.

"You 'll be in your element now, won't you, with *two* societies to rule over!" said Evelyn. The tone even more than the words brought the hot blood to Jean's face and made her eyes flash.

"I 'm certainly *not* going to have anything to do with ruling the League," she answered. "Douglas is to be the head of it."

They walked off in opposite directions, each with her head in the air. "What does she need to snap out at me like that for, when I 'm only

trying to make her feel better!" muttered Jean. She quite forgot that Evelyn had failed that morning in a difficult passage of Cicero and she herself had immediately afterwards translated it faultlessly.

That afternoon Cecily dispatched letters to her three cousins, and another to Stella. Next day brought a telegram to Miss Cecily Brook. Miss Carlton opened it with some anxiety, fearing that it might bring her pupil bad news from home. When she had read it, however, she sent for Cecily and with a quizzical expression requested to be enlightened as to its meaning. The telegram said:

"Letter received. Honor highly appreciated. Annex me. VAN COURTLANDT HAMILTON."

A day or two after Stella and Rose had enthusiastically responded, Jack's answer arrived, inscribed on a picture postal. "Of course I want to belong," wrote Hamilton the younger, "but don't make me secretary. I'm an N. G. correspondent, you know."

"I should think he *was* a 'no good' correspondent," said Cecily with scorn. "He's the laziest boy in the world about writing letters! I'm going to tell him there's no danger we'll make *him* secretary!" So Jack was assigned a place among the rank and file.

That a league had been formed in her behalf Carol was very far from dreaming on the day when she said good-by to Hiawatha. All night she had been at her post in the sick-room, relieving the worn-out mother; but now there was a joyous light in her eyes, for a change for the better had come. This morning her father was noticeably stronger.

A taste of fresh air and exercise was needed if she were to meet all the duties before her; so Carol was in her riding-habit, ready for an outing with her beautiful bay; a last one, for word had come from the lawyer that a purchaser for the horse had been found. Hiawatha greeted her with a soft glad nicker as she entered the stable. She led him from his stall and saddled and bridled him herself. He turned his head and looked at her lovingly as she stroked his glossy neck; and she told him the truth.

“You’re going to have another home now, dear. I don’t know where it is. I haven’t heard yet who wants to buy you, but I hope whoever it is will make a pet of you! I hope you’ll be happy! My beauty, you didn’t know your mistress had been advertising you for sale, did you? I feel like a traitor to you! But I *had* to do it. I need the money so,—I must help all I can! I love you just the same—you don’t know how I love you, you pet, you

splendid fellow! Don't look at me so,—don't! You 're to be sent to the city to-day, Hiawatha, but we 'll have one more ride, won't we? just one more good gallop together!"

Soon they were dashing down the country road, the spirited horse and his young rider. That was a magnificent gallop, bringing the fresh glow back to the girl's cheeks, and sending the blood dancing healthfully through her veins. But Hiawatha had a watchful mistress, and in a few minutes she made him slow down to a walk.

"Tired, boy? You 're panting! Well, you shall have a good rest now. I 'll walk beside you." She drew rein and dismounted. "I hope they 'll be careful of you and not ride you too hard. If I thought they would n't treat you kindly, I 'd never let you go! If they *dare* not to appreciate you!—but they *must* love you if they have any hearts in them!"

She led him along the shady road, on each hand the bright tender green of the time when Spring meets Summer. They talked together as they went, for Hiawatha *could* talk, with his soft expressive eyes and his restless ears, with noddings of his head, turnings of his neck, and all those pretty ways by which a horse knows how to hold converse with his owner. Their way led past a patch of woodland that set Carol thinking of the Adirondack wilds.

“I was going to take you to Halecyon this summer, Pet,” she said. “How you would have loved a race with Cyclone! But we won’t think of ‘might have been’ on our last holiday together!”

The roadside was all a-blossom; the flowering dogwood made sprinklings of snow amid the green. Carol broke off a white spray or two from the nearest tree. “Here, boy, let me put a flower in your button-hole!” And she decked out Hiawatha with a great snowy disk of petals at each rosette of his browband. “There now! You ought to see yourself! You’re enough to make a full-blooded Arabian jealous! Yes, that’s right! Bow your thanks politely, but not quite so hard—you’re shaking off your decorations! Come along, old fellow! No, you mustn’t stop to nibble grass! You rogue, you coaxing thing,—putting your velvet nose over my shoulder! We’ve had beautiful times together, haven’t we, Hiawatha? And what chums we were all last winter! Come, let’s have a last run together!”

Bridle in hand the girl ran down the road, her horse trotting beside her, till they came to a stone wall offering a good place from which to mount. Lissom and agile, in a twinkling she was back in the saddle once more, and on she rode at an easy trot, across the bridge, around the turn, then slowly homeward by an-

other way till they came in sight of the broad field on the Armstrongs' estate.

"Now, Hiawatha, let's take a fence!" A gentle flick of the crop, and they were off at a gallop. Carol headed straight for the field. Lightly, unswervingly as a hunting horse, Hiawatha took the fence. For an instant the earth was left behind and they were in the air; the next, the fleet hoofs struck the sod, and the horse was carrying his mistress across the meadow at top speed. A second fence: he cleared it gallantly, and the leap brought them over to the sward skirting the homestead garden.

Hiawatha was in his stall once more; the last sugar-treat was given; and Carol bade him farewell. "I'll see you again, Pet, when they come to take you away," she said, "but we'll have our real good-by now while we're all alone." She patted his shoulder and threw her arms around his arching neck. She took the noble head in her hands and kissed him. "Good-by, my beauty! my own dear old friend! Good-by!"

She turned away, her eyes so dim that only through a mist she saw two visitors entering the stable. She went forward to meet the newcomers, whoever they might be, and as her vision cleared she recognized Mr. Lennox and Jean!

"A young lady of my acquaintance is very much in need of a good saddle-horse," said Mr. Lennox, when the warm greeting was over. "So I am anxious to buy your Hiawatha for her."

"I told Daddy *he* needed a horse, and he said *I* needed a horse!" Jean burst in eagerly. "So he 's going to buy Hiawatha for *me*! But, Carolie dear, you must come and ride him whenever you can, and you and I 'll own him together. He must always be *half* your horse still."

It would have been worth the price of *two* horses, Jean's father said afterward, to see Carol's delight as she poured out her gratitude. But she said, "Little Sister, I want him to be yours altogether,—really and truly it will make me happier if he belongs *all* to you. Oh, Jean, you 'll love him so! And you don't know what a relief it is to know he 'll have such a happy home! And don't you see, he 'll really be in the family still, because his new mistress is my sister!"

So Hiawatha was rescued, but the League was no nearer to solving the problem of how to save his mistress. It made Jean's heart ache to look at the miniature in the locket. The sweet child face seemed to gaze at her with an

appeal for help which she knew not how to give. All the girls of her class were among those looking forward to the vacation on the shores of the Adirondack lake; yet the thought of poor Carol drudging away in the hot city cast a cloud over Jean's pleasure at the prospect of going to camp.

Five teachers were to chaperon the thirty schoolgirls and the group of alumnæ, who were to form the summer sisterhood, and the most popular of them all was Miss Hamersley, instructor in athletics. It was the week before Commencement that Miss Hamersley called Cecily and Jean aside after the gymnastic class and told them a piece of news which she had dreaded to break.

"I'm very sorry, indeed," said she, "but I'm afraid a teacher of athletics from some other school will have to be found to take charge of the boating and swimming lessons in my place this summer. I have had an offer to chaperon some young girls who are going abroad, and I feel that I ought to accept it and give up Halcyon."

"Oh, how splendid!" cried Jean.

Miss Hamersley looked at her in astonishment, and then began to laugh at this unexpected reception of her news. "Why, Jean!" she said, "Are you *glad* not to have me?"

Penitently Jean embraced her teacher. "Oh, Miss Hamersley, dear Miss Hamersley, how dreadful of me! But I did n't mean it as it sounded—honor bright I did n't! You're my favorite teacher,—indeed you are! I only meant it was splendid, because *now* we can have Carol! It's just the thing for her!"

"Carol Armstrong!" exclaimed Miss Hamersley. "But I thought she had taken a place already."

"She has n't begun yet, and we wish to keep her from it if we possibly can. We know she'll make herself ill, working down town in all the heat! And she's just the person to take your place. Just think how beautifully she can row and canoe and swim! You always said she was an expert!"

"Oh, Miss Hamersley, we *must* have her!" put in Cecily. "She's just the one!"

"Carol is certainly an expert," Miss Hamersley agreed. "But she is so young to be in charge."

"She's nineteen,—*that* is n't young!" Jean protested. "And she's just *made* for a teacher of athletics!"

"Yes, she's cool-headed and has presence of mind, but nineteen *is* young, and the question is, will the campers be ready to obey her?" said Miss Hamersley.

“We ’ll *make* them obey her!” Jean declared. “All the girls who were here when she was just love her. They ’d do anything for her. It ’s only the little freshies that don’t know her, and we ’ll *make* those infants mind!”

“Maybe you ’ve solved the difficulty, Jean,” said Miss Hamersley. “I ’ll speak to Miss Carlton about it this evening.”

A few days later Carol received an official document. “Why, it ’s from Douglas!” she exclaimed in surprise. The communication began:

“Douglas Gordon, Grand—”

Here followed a word in Greek letters. “The audacity of him to make me rub up my Greek!” said Carol. “Archon! That means *chief, or ruler.*”

“Douglas Gordon, Grand Ἀρχων of the L. S. R. to the Alruna of the Silver Sword”:—

“What under the sun, moon and stars is the L. S. R.? It must be some new fraternity.” She read on, and it was a pity that the League of the Signet Ring was not there to see the wonder and the pleasure that overspread her face. For the Archon of the League had written:

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“I have the honor to inform you that the position of Instructor in Athletics in the camp at Haleyon is offered to you at the salary which your worthy predecessor enjoyed. The L. S. R. earnestly hopes that you will accept this offer, as it is convinced that your presence is absolutely necessary to the happiness of the campers.”

CHAPTER IX

PICKEREL ISLAND

THE launch *Naiad*—Hiram Bolster, captain —was making the round trip of Halcyon, as lovely a lake as ever hills protected and a forest held in its embrace. Here it wound riverlike between its wooded shores; there it widened out into a broad basin; tiny bays and capes and islets inviting one to come and picnic gave variety to the scene, and the camps dotting the shores told that Halcyon had lured many to enjoy a summer in the wilds.

“See that bungalow over yonder and the little church above it?” said Captain Bolster. “That ’s Hurricane, Dr. Hamilton’s camp. He ’s a minister. And that there is Brook’s Cove,” he said a few minutes later as the *Naiad* glided into the most beautiful of all the basins, and he pointed out to his passengers a picturesque bay with a strip of beach where stood, at a little distance apart, two boat-houses and two docks. Above the curve of sand was a high bank.

“That fust little camp up there, that ’s *Rest-*

a-bit. The Lennoxes have it this year.” The captain indicated a dot of a camp in the woods just above the first boat-house. Above the second, under the shade of golden birches, were a dozen tents, a flag-pole in front, and near by a rustic bungalow.

“Looks as if they must have a regiment up there, don’t it?” the old man went on. “Well, so they have, only it’s a regiment of *gals*. I seen ’em drillin’ the other mornin’ and the purty little colonel givin’ ’em orders just like they was soldiers! *That’s* Mis’ Brook’s place. Them little school-gals call it *Huairarwee*. ‘Where are we?’—that’s what they mean, because folks gets lost in the woods tryin’ to find their way to it. They’re full of fun, them gals, and they do have a mighty good time.”

The girl campers were indeed having a most royal time with boating and bathing, tramping and picnicking, fishing, tennis and even base ball. And the pretty colonel was Carol herself. As her father was convalescent, she had been able to accept the appointment of instructor in athletics. Several weeks had now gone by, and never was there a busier young lady. At half past six each morning, with the bugle call of *reveille*, she roused the girls for “setting up” drill and the early dip in the lake. Later came a genuine military drill, her own institution, and the boating and swimming lessons; and al-

ready the good news had been sent to Miss Hamersley, "Your substitute is a prime success."

This afternoon the only members of the camp to salute the *Naiad* as she neared the beach were Pete Fenelson, the boatman, small Nanno Donohoe, protégée of the Silver Sword, and Cecily's collie, Roderick Dhu.

"If there ain't the camp baby a-settin' on a guide-basket!" said Hiram Bolster. "Hello, Nanny!" he shouted. "Be you and Pete a-keepin' company?"

"My Miss Jeanie 's gone fishin' an' Oi do be awful lonesome after her!" Nanno plaintively called back, but she shook her black curls in coquettish refusal when invited to come aboard.

The whole Order, with Carol and Fräulein Bunsen, were on their way to Pickerel Island to enjoy a night of camping out in open shacks, followed by a morning of fishing. It took half a dozen canoes and guide-boats to accommodate the party of sixteen with their camp blankets and provisions, and a rapid fire of merry chat and banter sounded over the water as the fleet skimmed on its way.

"Have you heard the latest guide story?" called Cecily from her canoe. "Jack says Jim Greene took a party up Sachem's Head the other day and they met a panther half way up!"

"Mercy! Do they have panthers as near as Sachem's Head?" cried Hilda.

"I am glad ye shall be on an island to-night," said Fräulein. "I do not tink such beasts like to schwim."

"What happened?" Jean called to Cecily. "Did the panther attack them?"

"No, Jim did n't give it time," answered Cecily, bringing her canoe closer. "He did n't have any gun, but he was afraid if he did n't go for the panther the panther would go for him! So he made one tremendous jump and waved his arms and shouted at the top of his lungs. And the poor panther was so scared it turned and fled for dear life!"

"Are they as big cowards as that!" exclaimed Jean with scorn. "My, would n't a panther have a fright if the whole Order jumped at it at once!"

"I 'm afraid the Order would jump the other way," said Carol, who had drawn near in her canoe, the *Hist-oh-Hist*, to hear the story. But Jean indignantly scouted the suggestion.

The boats were keeping sociably close together, and the tale had spread throughout the fleet by the time they were in sight of the woody islet with its rocky shore. Low cliffs nearly girdled it, but on one side was a tiny cove with a pebbly beach, and for this they headed.

"Is n't it fun to be taking possession like the

Swiss Family Robinson!" said Jean. "See the shacks up there, Hilda. That's where we're to sleep. This is going to be *real* camping out! We're too much petted up, at Huairarwee, with cots and dressing tables, and rugs on our floors, but this is the real thing!"

"And there is the real panther!" announced Frances. "Look, girls, look at that yellow thing up there among the trees!"

"Where? Where?" cried Hilda.

"She's only April-fooling," said Jean.

"No, I'm not. Look, child,—not over by the camp,—*there*, near the end of the island,—between those trees!"

Jean and Hilda followed the pointing of her finger, and saw a tawny-colored patch amid a clump of trees and bushes.

"It must be a deer!" exclaimed Jean.

"It's regular panther color," declared Frances. "Fräulein, panthers *do* like to swim!" she called gleefully. "There's one on the island!"

Frances' alarm-cry roused her sister voyagers to excitement, and diverse opinions were expressed as to the genus of the tawny creature.

"Of course it's a deer," said Phyllis. "The first I've ever seen outside of the zoo. And Cecily says they hardly ever come around Halcyon! Aren't we lucky?"

"Are you sure it's alive? It looks to me just like a rock," said Evelyn, who was slightly near-sighted.

"It can't be a deer," said Cecily. "A deer would n't swim way out to this island!"

"Would a panther?" laughed Jean.

"I tink our vild beast is a cow," said Fräulein.

"That's most as bad," said Betty, who was not cut out for a farmer's wife. "I think I'll spend the night in this boat."

"So will I," declared Adela. "I hate cows worse than spiders."

"Don't be panic-stricken, heroic battle maids," said Carol. "It looks to me like a calf. Somebody might have tethered it up there,—it's a good safe place."

"I think it's a big dog," said Cecily. "I wonder if Jack or Court could be up there with their St. Bernard. Let's halloo!" She tried the experiment, but only Echo answered.

"There! it's gone!" exclaimed her adopted sister, Stella. "You've scared it away."

"That *proves* it was a panther!" Frances insisted.

"Let's call it back," said Hilda. "Betsey and Del won't land till they know it is n't a cow."

Theories differing as to whether the occupant of the island was dog or cow, deer or panther,

a chorus of whistling began, mingled with calls of, "Puss, puss, puss!" "Here, Kitty kitty, catamount!" "Co boss! co boss!" "Here, dearie, dearie, *deer!*" But the creature of uncertain genus refused to be lured into view again.

"Betsey and Adela, you'd better come ashore with us," Hilda advised. "The panther might crawl out on that tree over the water and pounce down on you when you're asleep in the boat."

"Or the cow might come down to drink!" suggested Evelyn.

The craven-hearted members of the band decided that they would be safer under the protection of their dauntless friends, and so when the boats and canoes were beached the whole expedition climbed the woody bank.

Pickerel Camp consisted of two large open shacks built of logs, and a rustic pavilion with a table in it, ready for picnickers. The shacks were supplied each with a thick, springy bed of balsam boughs for the benefit of any fishing parties that might choose to rent the accommodations for the night. In front was a circle of blackened stones, with a pile of logs beside it, awaiting the building of the evening camp-fire.

"We'll have enough of a blaze to keep the panther from making a supper of us, anyway,"

said Carol, throwing down a bundle of red and gray blankets. "There go Jean and Frisky off to find his den. The instructor in athletics will have to go too and protect them." The instructor, being at heart a gipsy of a girl, who loved the woods and the wild things in them, was nothing loath to leave unpacking the baskets to trace the wild beast to its lair. The others followed.

"And so you leaf me to be eaten up alone!" protested Fräulein, laughing good-humoredly, as even Betty and Adela pressed after the bolder hunters.

Stealthily as Indians, Frances and Jean went prowling through the trees.

"Now go just as softly as you can," said Jean. "We don't want to frighten it, if it's a deer."

"Get ready for the jump!" returned the upholder of the panther theory.

A moment later the jump came. There was a rustling in the thicket, and their quarry started from its covert so suddenly that they sprang back in spite of themselves. But Jean clasped her hands in an ecstasy. "It's a fawn!" she whispered. "The darling!"

Carol, a step behind, turned to the girls in the rear with a warning signal to come silently. Noiselessly they crept up and saw as pretty a

sight as the forest can yield. Peeping out from the bushes a gentle little half-grown doe gazed at them, shy but unafraid. Her big ears were pricked up warily, and the girls hardly dared whisper lest she should dart away; but after studying the intruders a while out of those dark liquid eyes, she seemed convinced that the invasion of the island was a friendly one. First she nibbled a leaf or two with easy confidence; then out from the sheltering bushes the graceful creature stepped, and paused as if awaiting encouragement.

Jean and Frances picked each a handful of leaves and held them out invitingly. "Come, pet," they coaxed. "Come along, don't be afraid! We wouldn't hurt you for the world!" The big ears moved in response. The fawn listened and watched, while the cluster of friendly maidens wooed her with soft, low voices. Then, step by step the shy child of the forest advanced until, putting out a cautious nose, she sniffed Jean's leaves; then daintily nibbled them. Lightly Jean laid her hand on the fawn's neck; there was no starting away. The little doe stood still as if enjoying the caress, while Frances fed her in her turn. The compact of amity thus sealed, the girls were permitted to stroke the tawny side and pretty head. The fawn graciously accepted

every leafy offering presented, and even allowed Stella to kneel down in homage and put both arms around her neck.

"Did you ever see anything like her for making friends!" exclaimed Stella. "You little cunning!—somebody must have tamed you! But how did you get way over here? You could n't swim all the way across—you're too young!"

"She must be somebody's pet, and the owner has brought her over here and left her," said Carol. "Bright eyes, did they leave you marooned on a desert island! They ought to have been marooned themselves, so they ought!"

"Jim Greene and Cy Penfield built the shacks," said Cecily. "I wonder if she belongs to either of them. Let's see if she'll follow us. Come, beauty pet! Come, dearie!"

The girls enticed the little doe to follow as they turned back to their camp, and she showed herself as reluctant to be left behind as they were to part from her, coming slowly after them.

"See how curiously she raises her feet; why does she lift them so high?" asked Evelyn.

"That's because deer walk so much in the brush," explained Stella, who had spent most of her life in this wild region.

When the pretty fawn was formally introduced, she applied an inquisitive nose to the

stocking which Fräulein Bunsen was knitting.

"Ach, but I see a heartbreak to-morrow, when Jean parts from her!" said Fräulein.

"I sha'n't part from the darling if I can possibly help it," Jean promptly announced. "She 'll die of loneliness here, and if I can find out who the owner is and get him to sell her, I'm going to take her back to camp. She 'll make the loveliest pet for Nanno. We could keep her at Huairarwee, could n't we, Cece? If not, she could stay at Rest-a-bit."

"I think I could teach Roderick Dhu not to tease her," said Cecily. "He 's dreadfully naughty about chasing cats and chickens, but I'm sure I could make him understand. I've always wished we could have a fawn!"

"It would be a big help to us taking care of Nanno," said Stella. "She 's so beautifully spoilt now, she thinks she owns the whole camp!"

"And so to *unspoil* her you gif her a pet fawn!" laughed Fräulein. She was beginning to repent her allusion to Jean's heartbreak, but the entire Order voted to hunt down the owner of the stranded deer, raise a fund for the purchase of the little castaway, and present her to their spoiled protégée.

Meanwhile the subject of the debate made herself thoroughly at home, poking her nose into the guide-baskets, nearly upsetting the

milkcan, and finally walking into one of the huts, where she planted her pointed hoofs in the middle of the bed of balsam, and was only coaxed forth by the bribe of a sweet biscuit.

"We 'll have her for a room-mate to-night, if we don't take care," said Evelyn, and of this there seemed some danger. The ejected animal would not desert the precincts, but began to browse close by, while the veteran campers unpacked the baskets. Most of the new recruits, preferring to fill the larder, seized their fishing rods and made for the rocks.

"Fishing at half-past four in the afternoon, the verdant innocents!" scoffed Carol. "With the lake like a looking-glass! The pickerel must be laughing in their fins!"

No amount of argument could convince the enthusiastic anglers that their efforts were useless. But when they returned, on the verge of supper-time, there were ironical inquiries of, "Where are all your pickerel? We can't have a dinner party without a fish course!" For they had not a single victim to offer as the result of their toil.

"What's the menu for supper?" asked Betty, hungrily.

"Bacon and eggs, roast potatoes, griddle-cakes and cocoa," replied Carol, studying the paper in her hand. "And Fräulein insisted on an entrée of sandwiches in case two many

cooks spoiled the *bacon*. Who are to be the cooks this time? We 'd better elect Cecily and Stella if we want to live till to-morrow!"

"But if the *good* cooks always do it, the *bad* ones won't have any chance to learn," Jean objected.

"Don't elect Jean, or she'll boil the bacon and roast the eggs, and try to fry the cocoa," remarked Phyllis. "She was writing a poem to-day and her mind's in the moon!"

"Don't elect Phyl. She put salt for sugar in the lemonade at the last picnic!" retorted Jean.

"Let's draw lots," Evelyn suggested. She tore a number of curly strips of bark from a birch tree, wrote "Bacon and eggs" on two of them and "Griddle cakes" on two others, and putting them in a fishing-basket, called upon the company to draw.

"I'm a bacon and egg!" exclaimed Hilda.

"So am I!" said Jean.

"I see starvation ahead," sighed Carol. "Her majesty's literary brain is equal to Bacon's essays,—but if she *essays* bacon—!"

"What a gorgeous pun! Good for the Alruna!" cried Frances. She and Mildred announced themselves to be "griddle cakes."

"The four worst cooks in the whole crowd!" groaned Phyllis. "Make up your minds to a supper of roast potatoes and cocoa, and nothing more!"

"Make up your minds to burnt cocoa into the bargain, if Phyl boils it," Hilda retaliated.

"Make up your minds to no supper at all if we don't get some kindlings," said practical Cecily.

The island was scoured and the girls returned with bundles of fagots. They piled their fuel up scientifically. A forked branch for a crane was erected and the kettle was hung upon it. Carol and Cecily constructed a small stove of stones on which frying-pan or griddle could be placed. The fire was kindled, and when the potatoes were roasting in hot ashes Jean brought the basket of eggs, and Hilda a package of sliced bacon and the pan in which the staples of the feast were to sizzle.

"Have the plate ready," ordered Jean. "These are going to be the best eggs you ever tasted."

To be prepared for the delectable first course Betty and Maud hurried off to the dining pavilion to set the table, but they returned with their work only half done, for the sounds from the open air kitchen hinted that the drama of the frying-pan was a thrilling one.

"I'll do the *bacon* part," said Hilda with happy confidence.

"It's a choice of two evils," replied Carol, resignedly. But Hilda stoutly protested, "If I can't fry bacon as well as anyone after

watching it done over and over again, I'd better go back to mud pies! First you drop in the butter. Here, hand over the butter jar, Frisk!"

"No, no, no!" cried Stella. "You don't put butter in with bacon!"

"Oh! to be sure! I was thinking of pancakes," explained Hilda, and she covered her confusion by dropping a handful of sliced bacon into her pan.

"Heat the pan first, child!" admonished Carol. "Oh, Hilda, Hilda! Butter and a cold pan!"

"Well, you embarrass me, all staring like hungry ogres!" complained Hilda. "I can't think straight!" Much humiliated, she removed the bacon and set the pan on the stove to heat.

"Don't burn a hole through it," Cecily warned her.

"Look at our fawn!" Thekla suddenly exclaimed. "She does n't know what to make of our fire."

"The darling thing!" said Jean. "She wants to come to us but she does n't dare. She thinks we're going to roast her for venison! Come, Petsy,—come! We're not cannibals. We would n't cook you if we were starving!"

The fawn was gazing with puzzled eyes at the ascending smoke, but nothing could lure

her to any closer acquaintance with culinary affairs; and the girls forgot them completely in vainly coaxing her, till Carol cried out, "The frying pan! It must be red hot!" Before she could snatch it from the fire Hilda made up for past neglect by throwing in her slices of bacon once more, and a hissing began like exploding fire-crackers. Jean, not to be outdone, caught up an egg from the basket and shattered its shell against a stone.

"Whoa, Queenie! Hold up!" cried Carol.

"What are you doing, you silly?" screamed Hilda. "You don't drop the eggs in till the bacon's done." And the bewildered cook, obeying orders not to drop the egg *in*, dropped it *out* upon the stones.

Carol sank down upon the ground and gave way to heartless mirth. "Oh, Jean!" she laughed, "you looked just like an ancient Greek pouring out a libation!"

"But I thought you fried the bacon and eggs together! You *eat* them together," stammered poor Jean.

"Would n't it be rich to see Jean and Hilda trying to keep house!" jeered Evelyn.

"I kept house a whole week once," returned Hilda, "and I did it beautifully! But I did n't have you all standing around trying to fluster me!" And she proved her powers of housewifery by deftly turning the slices as they

browned. Crisp and sizzling, the first panful of bacon was placed on a heated platter and set to keep warm on one of the hot stones. The second panful and the third turned out still crisper and more appetizing.

"There now! Who saw starvation ahead?" Hilda triumphantly demanded.

"Don't count your eggs before they're broken," was the Alruna's oracular response.

"I hate to break eggs,—it scares me. They smash so suddenly and run over everything," said Jean.

"This is the way Jean breaks an egg for breakfast," said Cecily. "She looks at it helplessly for five minutes, and then gets me to do it for her. Better let me now. We can't afford to lose any."

"No, I must practice," Jean answered heroically.

"Don't feed the stones then, Queenie," said Carol. "Crack the eggs on the edge of the pan. But don't hammer them as if you were cleaving the helmet of an enemy with your silver sword. Just one nice little tap, and then drop them in quick."

Jean eyed the hissing, sputtering bacon dripings with some apprehension, but nerving herself for the ordeal she approached the frying-pan, an egg in her hand.

"Dearie, don't make such great frightened

eyes!" begged Carol. "Those are egg-shells, not bomb-shells."

"Don't get rattled now!" Frances besought her. "Be calm, cool and collected."

The girls formed a ring around the cooks, and, beating time, counted, "One—two—three,—smash!"

"Shoo! scat! if you don't want your supper spoiled!" said Carol, waving a dish towel at Jean's tormenters. "That's right! Give them eggs on the half shell." For the disconcerted chef was endeavoring to spoon out her plentiful sprinkling of egg-shell from the pan.

"I'd like to know how I'm to do it decently with you all jiggling and counting at me!" cried Jean. But she steeled herself for the task, and safely landed five white-and-yellow disks.

"That pan isn't steady. Look out! it's tipping!" exclaimed Cecily.

A violent sputtering ensued. Sizz! ftz! snap! "Ouch!" cried Jean and Hilda with one voice, as burning drops flew out on the hands of each. Simultaneously they jumped, and the result was a collapse of the stove and a capsize—eggs and all—into the fire. The hungry flames leaped up, and a wail of blasted hopes arose that sent the fawn scampering away to cover and brought Fräulein in haste down to the scene of woe.

“Six eggs gone!”

“And the frying-pan!”

“Take it out before it ’s ruined!”

“We can’t! We ’ll burn our hands off!”

“Oh dear! the whole stove ’s gone to pieces!”

Carol plunged a dish towel in a pail of water, and, wrapping her hand in it, snatched the pan from the midst of the blaze. The luckless cooks penitently bewailed their misdeed.

“Oh, girls, we ’re terribly sorry!” said Jean. “Which of us knocked the thing over, Hilda? I ’m sure I don’t know!”

“Both of us,” replied Hilda in deep chagrin.

“You cowards,—jumping from a mite of a burn like that! Fine battle maids you are!” scoffed their unsympathetic classmates.

“Mite of a burn! I wish you ’d felt it!” the injured cooks retorted.

“Misery, think of all the eggs we ’ve wasted!” groaned Jean. “But we ’ll go without eggs for supper and breakfast too, to make up.”

“You need n’t, if you ’ll go without doing any more cooking,” said Carol. “I packed in a few extra eggs in case of mishaps. Stella, you and I ’d better finish,—Saint Cecilia ’s in hysterics.” Tears of laughter were rolling down Cecily’s cheeks, but she and the other defrauded maidens clamored loudly for vengeance.

"Let 's give them nothing but mustard sandwiches and cocoa with salt in it for supper," Adela proposed.

"No, then they 'll be so cross they 'll keep us awake all night!" said Phyllis.

"Make the Alruna sentence them. She 's the proper one," advised Cecily.

"I sentence you to eat your supper standing up," said Carol.

"Horrors, Carol! We're the two tallest girls in the Order," exclaimed Hilda.

"Has anybody been stirring the cocoa, lately?" Cecily suddenly inquired. Phyllis started in dismay. The kettle had been her charge but she had deserted her post to watch the frying.

"Smells burnt," said Evelyn, sniffing.

Anxiously Phyllis dipped in her spoon. She tasted and grimaced. "Burnt so you can't drink it!" she gloomily confessed.

"Wretch! *You* eat your supper standing, too!" said Carol sternly.

"Hooray! We're not the only ones!" Jean and Hilda hailed her sentence with glee.

"Clear out of the kitchen now, you three criminals, and finish setting the table," Carol commanded.

"Oh, yes, and then you 'll tell us we didn't know how to set it," grumbled Jean. "You've criticized everything else we've done!"

"I don't believe you *do* know how, Queenie," Carol answered, laughing. "But I 'll suppress all my sarcasm if you 'll only have it set by the time the eggs are ready. We won't get to the griddle-cakes till midnight at this rate."

"We promise not to creeticize. Only make haste, meine kinder," said kind little Fräulein.

Accordingly the guilty trio were banished, and when the stove had been rebuilt the egg frying proceeded without accident, and a second kettleful of cocoa was brewed.

The first course ready, the hungry company filed up to the pavilion where they stopped and stared, aghast. Behold, the dining table had risen! The neatly set board had increased its height by more than a foot! Behind it stood Jean, Hilda and Phyllis, enjoying sandwiches, their plates at exactly the right distance.

"You villains!" cried Carol, threatening them with the steaming kettle.

"You rascals! You wretches!" exclaimed the discomfited band. "Look, they 've raised it on those wooden boxes! Why didn't we break them up for kindling first!" Sure enough! the sentenced criminals had helped themselves out of their predicament with the aid of wooden boxes which some previous camping party had left behind. The three looked up from their sandwiches to smile se-

renely, and quoted in unison, "He who laughs last, laughs best!"

"We'll see who laughs last!" cried the others. "Lift up the table! Take away the boxes!"

Jean regarded the mob with undiminished calm. "No, you can't! Fräulein Bunsen promised for all of you that you would not criticize if we had the table set in time, and to take away the boxes would be the worst kind of criticism," said she. "Carol, you promised not to be sarcastic, so you can't say a word!"

"Fräulein, let's resign our offices,—they're too bright for us!" exclaimed Carol, and Fräulein Bunsen held up her hands in despair. "Ach, my unhappy speech! Never mind. I giff you hard lessons next year! But do you expect me to eat *my* supper so, bad children? I cannot see above my plate!"

"We're going to make you a beautiful throne, Fräulein," said Jean. She brought a heap of blankets, arranged them on the bench at the head of the table, placed a guide-basket as a footstool, and politely assisted the little teacher to mount her throne; but no such luxury was allowed poor Frances, the shortest of all.

The two rows of hapless girls sat feasting with their chins almost resting on the table. Carol declared they would all be cross-eyed for

life. The poor Mouse was a sight to melt any hearts but those of the remorseless three, for *her* chin was below the edge of the table. Yet not even Frances was hindered by the difficulties of her position from doing full justice to the banquet. Altogether the supper on Pickerel Island was pronounced a signal success.

CHAPTER X

THE WIZARD'S GROTTA

THAT evening the girls were again afloat, and the twilight had deepened into blackness, pierced by twinkling stars, by the time they landed on Pickerel Beach once more.

"The old lady chaperons do all the hard work, so I'll have to put the shacks to rights for the night," said Carol. "You young and charming things may play a while longer."

Most of the "young and charming things" followed her up the bank, but Cecily detained the three criminal cooks.

"Hil and Phyl, you *must* make Jean tell you the ghost story she kept Betty and Frisk and me awake with, last night," said she. "Tell it to them down here by the water, Jean. It'll sound so much weirder!"

Jean was as ready to harrow her accomplices as they were to have their blood run cold; so, while Cecily went after the others, the trio seated themselves on a rock by the lake-side, and the story-teller sent chills running up and down her listeners' spinal columns and her

own as well. When the final catastrophe had caused them to enjoy delightful creeps, they noticed that the world around them seemed more gruesomely dark than before.

"Isn't it pitchy!" exclaimed Hilda. "I wonder why they don't light the camp-fire! We shan't be able to see our way up!"

"How quiet it all is too!" said Jean. "You can almost *hear* the stillness!"

"It's *too* quiet after your spooky story!" said Phyllis. "Let's go up and be sociable."

Stumbling over roots and stones in the darkness they climbed the bank. As they reached the top Hilda, in the lead, started and stopped short. "Mercy! What's that?" she cried. The others looked through the trees and saw, but a few feet ahead of them, two points of yellow light, like the eyes of a wild beast, shining out of the blackness. .

"It's an animal!" whispered Phyllis. "Come back!"

"It must be our fawn," said Jean. "Is that you, pet?"

Phyllis pulled her backward. "You don't know what it is," she warned her. "Don't go up to it, child,—leave it alone!"

"Goosie, what else could it be but the fawn?" laughed Jean. "Her eyes would shine at night—any animal's would. Come along!" Clapping her hands and chirruping to rouse

the creature, she boldly advanced; but this time Phyllis and Hilda both clutched her and dragged her back.

"It growled!" they whispered.

"No, it did n't," Jean contradicted.

"Sh! Yes, it did, we both heard it," Phyllis insisted, but under her breath, and the two maids of honor drew their dauntless sovereign hastily down the bank.

"It's a wildcat, or something!" said Hilda.

"Wildcat! *'Fraid-cats!* That's what you are!" said Jean. "They don't have any wild animals around Halcyon. We tramped all over last year, and we never met anything worse than a baby porcupine. Stop, Phyllis, it is n't coming after us!" However, Phyllis was in full retreat, nor could she be stayed till they had gained the beach.

"They might have a tame wildcat here, as well as a tame fawn," Hilda suggested, as they halted for a council of war.

"Or even a tame panther-cub," added Phyllis.

"I don't believe it was anything at all but two fireflies," said Jean.

"Fireflies would n't stay still like that," returned Phyllis.

"We did n't wait to see if they stayed still or not. We just took one look, and then you dragged me down the bank!"

"It would have sprung at you if we had n't,"

Hilda declared. "You must be deaf if you didn't hear it growl."

"Well, even if it did, it can't be anything worse than a coon," said Jean. "They must growl, I suppose; but they don't hurt you anyway. Let's see if it's there still."

"I'm not going up *that* way again," said Phyllis. "And you'd better not either, if you don't want the thing to fly in your face!"

"Fireflies won't hurt my face, and coons can't fly," replied Jean, with reckless gaiety. "Come on, cowards! We'll have to go that way if we don't want to be caught all night in the brambles, or break our necks climbing up the rocks in the dark. I'm going, anyway,—good-by!"

This was an unanswerable argument in favor of again confronting the shining eyes; and as their leader insisted on going forward her two devoted followers crept after her, Hilda with a grip on Jean's dress, and Phyllis clinging to Hilda's. The yellow orbs were still glaring out of the pitchy gloom when they reached the top, and they heard a low "gr-r-r-r-rh!" It sent the valiant three several steps down the bank again.

"It *did* growl!" Jean acknowledged. "It must be a coon."

"It's ready to attack us, whatever it is," whispered Phyllis.

"We mustn't go by there for anything!" said Hilda. "We'll have to go down to the beach again and call up to the girls."

"That'll bring it down on us," Phyllis objected, and all the while she and Hilda were in retreat, drawing Jean with them. Discretion certainly did seem the better part of valor, even to the doughty Queen, and behind a sheltering clump of bushes she proposed a compromise.

"We needn't go up to it. We can go just under the top of the bank and creep around it."

"It'll hear us rustling," Phyllis warned her, but inspired by her leader Hilda summoned up courage to try the new tactics. Phyllis would not be left behind. So a third time they advanced, their ears alert for a repetition of the "gr-r-r-rh," or a snapping of twigs warning them that their enemy was stealing upon them. Near the top they attempted a *detour*, but found a tangle of undergrowth barring their way. There was nothing for it but to come within range of the eyes once more, and give their owner as wide a berth as possible.

Jean's heart was beating faster than she would have liked to confess, and it did seem to her possible that the island held more of a menagerie than they had supposed, as, reaching the summit again, she beheld once more those watchful points of light. For an instant she stood in doubt whether to proceed or to withdraw into

the covert of the bushes and reconsider: but the question was settled for her, and that without delay. A howl, an ear-piercing yell, rent the still night air. A crashing followed, as of some wild creature bursting through the thicket. Jean sprang back against Hilda, Hilda against Phyllis; Phyllis's jump brought her upon a loose bit of rock which gave way beneath her feet. A landslide ensued, of earth and stones, and with it went Phyllis, borne down by Hilda and shrieking, fully persuaded that the weight upon her was a catamount at least. Down went Hilda too, and the Queen herself, losing her balance as the girl below her lost hers. Slipping, sliding, the three found themselves coasting willy-nilly to the beach! There they landed in a gasping heap; and as they picked themselves up they heard above them—not the yell of a pouncing feline—but a chorus of voices solemnly intoning, "*He who laughs last laughs best!*"

"You wicked, wicked, wicked sinners! You won't laugh after we get up to the top again!" three wrathful voices responded, and the avalanche of girls began to scramble up again.

"You're not hurt, are you?" Cecily's voice called anxiously down to them.

"We're nothing but scratches and bruises, and we nearly broke our necks!" the injured three made answer.

“Well, you made *me* dislocate *my* neck, trying to see over my plate! So it just serves you right!” Frances retorted.

“But how did you tumble way down to the beach?” asked Betty. “We heard you screaming and rolling! What happened?”

“The bank caved in, and if we’d been buried alive it would have been all your own fault!” returned Jean in warlike accents.

The three offended battle maids charged up the slope, fell upon the mischievous band who had emerged from ambush among the trees, and, laughing and berating them, vigorously shook as many as they caught.

“You might have driven us insane with fright!” cried Phyllis.

“Poor Phyl nearly went crazy for life!” declared Hilda.

“So did you!” Phyllis retorted.

“See what the panther was made of!” exclaimed Jean, who had turned from shaking Frances to study the anatomy of the beast.

The body of the animal turned out to be a large pasteboard luncheon-box, in which two holes had been cut. Inside it stood a lantern, and the box was covered with Fräulein’s light-gray shawl, which saved the eyes of the catamount from gleaming with too fiery a brightness.

“Who made him?” asked Hilda.

"Frisk and I," answered Cecily. "We planned him before we left Huairarwee, and we were going to scare the whole of you; but then we decided we'd just use him to punish you three. Frisky gave the howl. Mouse, that was wicked of you! It's dreadfully dangerous to scream out at people suddenly!"

"Jack taught me the catamount yell," Frances explained. "Shall I give it again?"

Here a reproachful voice called from the encampment, "Girls, you've driven our poor fawn into nervous prostration! She's on the verge of collapse!" Solicitous for their pet the girls hurried to the camp. There by the lantern light they saw Carol kneeling on the ground, embracing the fawn which was cowering in her protecting arms.

"She must have been the creature we heard crashing through the bushes!" exclaimed Jean. "Were you frightened out of your wits, petsy dear?"

"You've nearly brought on a case of heart failure," said Carol. "Feel how she's palpitating! It was that awful yowl that scared her! She came rushing into the camp thinking a whole pack of panthers was after her! No, she says it's no use trying to make peace: she doesn't love you any more. What *were* you up to, girls?"

The story of the gleaming yellow eyes was re-

lated, and the agitated fawn was remorsefully fondled, until she was so far soothed as to accept a lettuce leaf from the guilty Frances herself.

“Bad, bad girls!” exclaimed Fräulein Bunsen. “To-night you dream vild beasts devour you!”

Whatever dreams might haunt their slumbers, the camp-fire that glowed through the night would have kept at bay the hungriest catamount that ever prowled. About midnight Adela roused her sleeping comrades, insisting that she heard a wild beast howling, but Stella pronounced it a screech-owl, and nothing more ferocious came to disturb them than the little ball of feathers keeping vigil in a tree-top.

Lake and hills were shrouded in mist, and the dawn had not yet climbed over Eagle Cliff, when the fisher maidens rose from their balsam couches to work havoc among the pickerel. This time the lines were cast in to good purpose, and the novices who had angled in vain the day before could show fine trophies when they left the rocks for breakfast. Enough pickerel were caught to provide the desired fish course for dinner as well, and the largest specimen of all was reserved as a gift for Mrs. Brook. A cruise filled up the later morning hours, and at noon Carol found half the Order in the cool retreat of the “Wizard’s Grotto.” They were



IN THE COOL RETREAT OF THE "WIZARD'S GROTTO."

seated on the brink of the "Wizard's Washbowl," a black pool in the heart of the cavern; and though they were packed like sardines, as Frances said, they contrived to make room for their chief councillor.

"I'm going to take a dip in the washbowl some day. I love 'the cool, silver shock of the plunge in the pool's living water,'" said Jean, who was equally fond of a plunge into her Browning.

"You gave Fräulein 'a cool, silver shock,' vanishing like this!" remarked Carol. "They're in the cave!" she called to Fräulein Bunsen, who was sketching among the trees. Then she joined the group by the washbowl, and all became so absorbed in plans for the next excursion that for some moments no one glanced at the water. Presently Hilda turned to dabble her hand in the pool, and received a shock, herself, of a most unexpected kind.

"Girls, what's that thing in the water?" she fairly screamed. Her start and exclamation made the others jump. She was staring aghast at the pool. A white object was bobbing in the center of the inky water where nothing had been five minutes before. The thing was of a nature to cause the Wizard's lair to resound with shrieks of surprise not unmixed with horror, and the same cry was on every tongue, "It's a hand! *A human hand!*"

Yes, it was a hand! White as chalk! And it signaled to the girls with its extended fingers!

“Horrors alive! How did the thing get there?”

“It’s the wizard!—he’s coming up after us!”

“No, it’s just his hand he’s sent up!—his horrible, white, ghostly hand!”

“Look, look! It has a ring on its finger. A gold ring!”

“It *has*! A gold finger-ring!”

“Pick it out, Jean! You’re the nearest!” said Frances.

“Oh, yes! Easy enough to say, ‘Pick it out!’ but I don’t like hands without arms. Oogh! it looks clammy. Well, here goes!” Jean made one heroic snatch and held the trophy up by a finger. A burst of laughter followed. It was a glove; nothing but a lady’s white chamois skin glove, with a fishing line trailing from it. Inflated with air, it was bound tight at the wrist by the line, which served also to tie the ring securely to the finger. The ring was set with a large stone. Jean carried it to the light, stared, and gasped, “For pity’s sake, it’s my precious signet!”

Yesterday, before starting for camp, Jean had found that the amethyst seal was a trifle loose, and had left Veronica’s ring at Camp Hurricane to be carried to a jeweler’s by Court,

who was to go to New York in a day or two. Yet here, beyond all doubt, was the royal signet, with the familiar monogram!

"Oh, yes, your majesty," said Cecily, "stare, and look the soul of innocence! But you know you put it in there yourself when our backs were turned!"

"I? Not much! Do you think I'd risk my darling ring like that? It's a trick of Frisky's. She must have wheedled it back from Court." Jean turned on Frances with ferocity. "Mouse, confess your crimes this instant, or I'll expel you from the Order!"

"Have n't any to confess," replied Frances. "This is the first trick I *have n't* played."

The others likewise protested their innocence.

"Then it's some of the other girls," said Cecily. "They must have let it down by the fish-line through that crack in the roof, and we were so busy talking we did n't notice."

"I'll court-martial them this minute!" cried the Queen, and she despatched Frances to the other side of the island to summon the rest of the party to answer to the charge. They came pell mell to the grotto, but their evident amazement at once cleared them of all suspicion.

"Then a *pirate* did it, and he must have come cruising along while we were in the cave!" de-

clared Carol. "Cecily, my next glove bill goes to your revered Cousin Jack. I suspect this is one of the spic and span white gloves that I left in the chapel on Sunday. If I don't fire a bombshell into Camp Hurricane!"

"If Jack's done it, I'll give him the biggest talking to he's ever had!" exclaimed Cecily.

Dinner over, the girls, on vengeance bent, returned to Huairarwee. That same afternoon Court and Jack were out sailing in the Hamiltons' cat-boat, *Unda*, and with them was Douglas, who was spending the summer at Rest-a-bit. When the *Unda* came gliding into the Brooks' cove her crew beheld a solid phalanx of battle maids drawn up on the dock.

"My signet ring has been stolen, and you've got the thief on board!" Jean called through the megaphone.

"Did you say we'd got *beef-tea* on board?" Court shouted back.

"Tell them we subpœna them to a trial for grand larceny," said Carol, and Jean megaphoned the summons.

"What did you say? Peanuts or a diet of canned arsenic?"

"He's only teasing you," said Cecily. "Wait till they get to shore."

"Well, how many pickerel *did n't* you catch?" asked Douglas, as the *Unda* was putting in to the dock.

"Never mind how many we did or did n't," returned Jean. "We caught a glove with an amethyst ring on its finger, sailing in the Wash-bowl! And now we 're going to catch the thief! Who stole my royal signet?"

Carol fixed Jack sternly with her eye and said, "Which of you three stole that ring?"

"There are *four* of us here," replied Jack. And so there were, for at that moment, as the sail came rattling down, a tawny head appeared, and the fourth member of the ship's company stood revealed. At sight of him Carol nearly stepped into the lake in her astonishment.

"Why, Eric Armstrong!" she cried, and the tawny-headed seaman responded, "Hello, Sister! Did n't expect to see *me* here, did you?"

If Eric had just returned from a voyage around the world his sister could not have given him a gladder welcome.

"Don't say we 're not good members of the League *now*," said Jack aside to Jean.

When Eric had shaken hands all around, Carol laid hers on his shoulders and demanded, "Now *how* and *when* did you come here, and what does it all mean?"

Eric grinned.

"How? Montreal express, and stage. When? Three P. M. yesterday. And it means the Hamiltons gave me an invite for a month."

"Court! Jack! Have you really? How perfect for him!" cried Carol. "A whole month! Eric, you *have* tumbled into a field of clover!" As she turned to thank them, the loyal brothers of the League felt themselves amply rewarded by the joy shining in her face.

"But you never breathed a word about it. Court, you were as silent as a mummy."

"We knew you liked surprises," answered Court. "I'm sorry we couldn't get him up here before you started for the island."

"Please tell me who thought Carol would like *this* kind of a surprise," put in Cecily, suddenly confronting Jack with the glove which she had been guarding. "Who spoiled Carol's nice white glove? And who stole our signet ring?"

"Search *me*!" said Jack.

"I did n't," said Douglas.

"Whoever stole it, stole it from *me*," said Court.

"Why, didn't I send down my visiting-card?" Eric inquired.

"No. Unfortunately you did n't, as you're not venerable enough to have any," replied his sister. "But we don't need your card to convict you. If you've been in this place twenty-four hours, that's proof positive you've been up to some trick!"

"Well, then, I'll own up. Mrs. Hamilton

found your gloves in the chapel this morning and asked me to take 'em to you. Here's the other one." Eric presented the uninjured mate. "And then I found the ring lying around loose in Court's tent, and I thought the quickest thing was to take 'em both up to Pick-erel Island. So I swiped Jack's canoe—"

"You seem to know the geography of Halcyon by heart, if you did only arrive yesterday." Carol interrupted.

"Oh, Jack took me out sailing as soon as I got here," Eric explained. "And we went up past the island. Well, I took his canoe and followed you up. I heard you talking inside the cave, and I climbed up on top and looked down through a split in the roof, and there you all were! Well, of course I couldn't interrupt ladies, so I just let the ring down to you the politest way I could. I saw there was water in the cave, so I thought I'd make it swim. I took a glove and made the ring fast on its wedding-finger, blew up the glove, tied it up good and tight and let it down. As soon as I heard you yelling I knew you'd got 'em all right, so I cut."

"It's a miracle that precious ring is n't gone forever!" declared his sister, employing the maltreated glove to box her brother's ears.

"He ought to have sent it through the *cellar door*," said Jack. "Did you know the grotto

had a basement entrance, at the bottom of the lake? I was trolling over by the island the other day, and a pickerel swallowed my spoon-hook and bit the line off; and the next time I was in the grotto I found him floating in the Washbowl, dead, with the spoon stuck in his mouth. I knew there must be a sizable opening to let a six-pounder through, so I dived down and found the place. There's a wide crack in the rock there. But I was n't a party to the glove crime, honest! He did that stunt himself."

"I'm going to dive down myself, some time, and see if it's wide enough to let *me* through," said Eric. "See if I don't!"

"No, you won't, sir!" replied Carol with decision. "You will kindly preserve yourself intact this summer—you've risked enough valuable things already. Young man, you deserve a hot, spiced slice of my mind, and you'd have one, too, if I was n't so insanely glad to see you that I believe I'd forgive you if you played sailboat with my best hat!"

"You leave him to me," said Court. "I'm going to deal with him myself, for stealing that ring out of my tent. He's to be hanged at the yard arm of the *Unda* at sundown!"

Thus the youngest scion of the house of Armstrong won himself notoriety, and thus Veronica's ring added a new chapter to its varied history.

CHAPTER XI

“TANTARA!”

THE fawn of Pickerel Island turned out to belong to Jim Green, and to be named “Zillie” after the guide’s little daughter, Zillah Rosie. Her master had been obliged to maroon her on the islet to save her from a neighbor’s dog, but he was glad to find a less lonely home for his sociable pet, and offered her to the campers free of charge. A paddock was prepared at once, and Nanno, ignorant of the fact that she was to have a four-footed playmate, watched Douglas and Pete Fenelson with much interest as they constructed a fence of stakes and strong wire.

“We ’re making a pen for you, Pug-nose, to shut you up in when you ’re naughty,” Douglas informed her. To which Nanno responded, dimpling, “Sure, Oi can squeeze under and git out,” and proved her powers of prison-breaking on the spot.

When the paddock was ready, Douglas, Jack, and Eric undertook to transport Zillie to her new home, bringing her from Pickerel Island

by means of the Huairarwee fishing-boat. Nanno was dancing up and down in excitement and Cecily was clutching Roderick Dhu, when the boys arrived with their unwilling passenger, and, lifting her out, deposited her on the dock.

"You 'll have to shut Rod up in the boat-house, or there 'll be a row when I get her feet untied!" said Douglas.

Cecily dragged the barking collie away and left him scratching frantically against the closed door of the boat-house. Douglas unfastened the rope which had tied the sharp hoofs together and kept the mutinous voyager from leaping out of the boat. Zillie had been newly provided with a collar and leading-rope, and but for these the girls would have had to bid her farewell three minutes after her arrival. No sooner had the fawn regained the use of her feet than she was attacked by a mania for escape. She bounded this way and that; and as Douglas tried to lead her along she ran round and round him, winding him up in her rope, thereby causing the other boys to jeer at his attempts to escort his captive to her pen. The antics executed in the transit from dock to paddock would have made her fawnship's fame in a circus arena, and Nanno fled screaming when the new pet charged in her direction. But once safe in the enclosure this

delirium subsided. Zillie trotted quietly around her pasture, and, seemingly satisfied with her little domain, presently began to graze; nor did she start away from the admiring hostesses who entered the pen to feed and fondle their pretty guest.

“Come here, Babykins, and make friends with her!” Jean called to Nanno.

“Will she *buck* me?” asked Nanno, hanging back.

“No, she won’t butt you. She holds her head down and shakes it just for fun,” said Cecily, taking the little girl by the hand. “Come and pick some clover for her.” Nanno selected the longest blade procurable, and presented it at arm’s length.

“You must give her the very nicest things you can find for her to eat,” said Jean. “Then she ’ll learn to love you.”

Nanno was apt to forget the injunctions of her guardians, but this one she faithfully remembered. Her fear of her playmate soon wore off, and she was discovered later offering Zillie, through the fence, a large bunch of nasturtiums from Cecily’s cherished flowerbed.

“Oi want some sugar for meself and Zillie. We ’re playin’ party!” Nanno announced next day to Stella, who was shelling peas on the kitchen doorstep.

“Dear me, Baby! Sugar, after all those

ginger snaps! Well, just one lump, or you 'll make yourself sick. And one for Zillie—that 's all you can have."

"And one for Miss Jeanie, too; she 's got to come to me party," said Nanno.

"No, dear, Miss Jeanie can't come. She 's busy writing and you mustn't interrupt her when you go for the sugar. Now remember: take *one* little lump for yourself and *one* little lump for Zillie, and then you must steal away quietly, like a good little girl, and not bother Miss Jeanie."

Jean, writing in the living-room, hardly noticed the small figure tiptoeing up to the sideboard and away again. But Amelie, the waitress, presently discovered that the sugar-bowl was empty. Stella guessed where the plunderer would be found, and she reached the paddock in time to see Nanno and Zillie sharing the last lumps of sugar.

"Nanno! you 're no better than a *thief!*" said Stella, solemnly, resolving to awaken her to a sense of the enormity of her crime. Nanno listened with a guileless expression, crunching placidly. "It was *stealing* to take all that sugar. What made you do it?"

"Youse *told* me to," replied the culprit, with mischief dancing in her eyes.

"I—*told* you to!" gasped Stella.

"Sure! Youse said: 'take one little lump

for mesilf an' one little lump for Zillie, an' den I must *steal away* quietly, and not bodder Miss Jeanie.' So Oi *stole away*—Oi stole *all* de sugar *very* quietly,—an' Oi did n't bodder Miss Jeanie one bit! An' we're having a luvully party!”

“Nanno, you're a naughty, naughty little girl!” said Stella, keeping her gravity by an heroic effort. “You know very well I meant '*go away quietly.*' Now I'm going to take you right straight to Mrs. Brook, and tell her all about it!”

Convinced that it was high time to resort to strong measures, Stella kept her word and led the incorrigible camp baby to Mrs. Brook, who inflicted a dire punishment. The squanderer of sugar was obliged to eat her blueberries minus that luxury at supper.

Treated to sugar by the bowlful, Zillie centered her affections on the youngest camper; yet the next time that Nanno entered the paddock alone her playmate basely took the opportunity to escape by the open gate. Immediately afterwards a furious barking was heard, and Zillie was discovered keeping Roderick Dhu at bay—the collie alternately rushing at the rearing fawn, and retreating as she struck down at him with those sharp-pointed hoofs. The combatants were separated, and Zillie was imprisoned again, but after this

Nanno was forbidden to go alone into the paddock, and a lock was put on the gate.

"Come wid me an' let 's play wid Zillie," she pleaded one sultry afternoon, coaxing Cecily, Frances and Betty, each in turn. But Cecily was embroidering a new collar for herself; Frances and Betty were resting after tennis, and declared it to be too hot to stir. Jean not being on hand, Nanno appealed to Evelyn, who was absorbed in an interesting book.

"Very well, Nanno, I 'll go with you," Evelyn answered, laying down her book at once. "I have some nice crackers in my tent, and we 'll feed her with them." She took the little hand that had been grubbing in the soil, and they set forth, Nanno skipping gleefully by her side.

"How sweet Evelyn always is to Nanno!" exclaimed Cecily.

"She 's sweeter than *I* was just now," said Betty, with a laugh. "I told Nanno she was a little bother. It 's funny,—you wouldn't think Ev was the kind to care about small children. She 's a queer girl; she has so many sides!"

"She 's a polygon!" observed Frances.

"She 's not a paragon though—but she 's getting real nice lately," said Cecily. "Jean and I were talking about it this morning. Halcyon must be doing her good."

“She does n’t warm up to Jean much,” remarked Betty.

“Well, no—nor to any of us, except Thekla,” replied Cecily. “I don’t believe she knows how. But she has n’t had a real, genuine *fit* since she came here!”

“Maybe she wound up for the summer with that bouncing big one she had at exam time, because Jean beat her in Latin!” suggested Betty.

“Cheer up! The worst is yet to come!” Frances prophesied.

But Cecily was hopeful. Had she not found that thorny character blossoming with at least one sweet rose!

Two happy weeks went by. At Camp Hurricane Eric grew as brown as an Indian. At Huairarwee Carol’s pupils progressed admirably, and Cecily’s hopes for peace seemed well founded, for in all that time no storms came to break the Halcyon calm of the happy holidays.

The Order of the Silver Sword was engaged one afternoon in the singular occupation of tearing paper into small bits. Newspapers, wrapping paper, blank books, pads, old letters and envelopes littered the table around which the members were seated. The only battle maid not busy with the work of destruction was Evelyn, who was out on the veranda writing.

"I wonder how much more paper we 'll have to tear up," said Betty, rather wearily, as she surveyed her promising heap of scraps.

" 'Three bags full,' as the black sheep said," replied Cecily. "And more too. We 've hardly enough for *one* bag yet!"

"Not enough for *one*, after we 've been working all this time!" groaned Betty.

"Our hands 'll be worn off before the paper 's ready," declared Phyllis. She swept the scraps into a turkey-red bag and found Cecily's calculation to be correct. "Isn't it discouraging! What looks like such a splendid heap on the table crushes down into nothing at all when you stuff it into a bag."

"Jean Lennox, stop! You 're tearing up one of your own poems!" cried Hilda.

"I know it by heart," said the poet, ruthlessly rending the effusion asunder. "I 'll have to tear up my whole bookful of rhymes before we 're done. Girls, this is going to take all the paper in camp, and we won't be through till to-morrow morning!"

"Are you beginning to repent? I thought you would!" Evelyn called in through the window. But she was answered by a chorus of determined "No's!"

"We 're not repentant; we 're only exhausted," Frances explained. She rolled a sheet of paper into a trumpet and blew through

it a dolorous blast that sent her fragments flying like a flock of white butterflies.

“Don’t, Frisk! We can’t afford to waste one little bit!” cried Betty, piteously; and Thekla called reproachfully, “We ’d get on faster if you ’d help, Evelyn!”

“I can’t; I must finish this letter,” returned the truant maid of honor, and bent over her portfolio again.

“When Evelyn says ‘cah-ah-ahn’t,’ then it’s hopeless,” remarked Phyllis, in an undertone. “Have you ever noticed? The stubbornner she is, the broader she pronounces her A’s.”

The paper-tearers went on destroying in desperation. Evelyn finished her letter, and looked up in time to see a tug of war going on near the boat-house. The ten youngest girls of the camp were returning from an afternoon of boating practice, and they were divided into two opposing bands, each of which was fighting for the possession of the Instructor in Athletics. Barbara von Linden and Mollie Tremaine each had her by an arm. On one hand a chain of four girls was linked to Barbara, and, on the other, four more were linked to Mollie; and both sides seemed equally determined to gain full ownership of the laughing young teacher. The dispute was still unsettled when the line of claimants and the cause of the war arrived at the bungalow veranda.

"Come and rescue me, Evelyn, or I shall have to change my name from Armstrong to Armless!" declared Carol. "I'm being pulled to pieces by rival factions."

"We're fighting to see which side can have the *con-cons* with Miss Armstrong this week," said Mollie.

"What in the world are *con-cons*?" asked Evelyn.

"Why, don't you know? Confidential confabs; they're the latest fad!" Mollie explained. "We make dates with the big girls for confidential talks; but if we can get Miss Armstrong for one, that's the best of all! Whenever we've had any squabbles or bothers she always straightens things out for us so beautifully! She's very hard-hearted though. She says she only has time for one con-con a day; so it takes ever so long to go the rounds of the whole ten of us!"

"And my side gets her this week!" cried Barbara, as Mollie, absorbed with her explanation, relaxed her grip of Carol's arm, and the alert foes suddenly pulled the fair lady over to their side. The defeated assailed poor Mollie with reproaches for her lack of vigilance, till she pacified them with the announcement: "Never mind, girls—our side will have all the con-cons with Jean and Cecily!"

"Confidential confabs with *Jean*! They'll

be romantic to say the least!” exclaimed Evelyn. Following Carol and the rival factions indoors she overheard Mollie whispering to Barbara, “I would n’t care to ask *Evelyn* to a con-con, would you?”

“No!” Barbara emphatically responded. “Nobody would. She’s too stuck up and snubby!”

Evelyn’s heightened color was unnoticed by the troop as they entered the living-room, for the youngest campers had eyes for nothing but the extraordinary occupation of the Order. Had they suddenly gone demented thus to be tearing up a whole tableful of paper?

“Why, this looks like Hare and Hounds!” exclaimed Carol.

“No, it’s a deer hunt,” answered Jean. “We Silver Swords are getting up a deer hunt, and we’re going to ask all the girls who want to, to join it. Alruna, you must come too, and be the leader of the deer.” Then in answer to a clamorous “What do you mean?” she explained the why and wherefore of the scraps of paper. “We’ve been racking our brains to think of some brand new kind of a jollification for you, and finally we decided to play Hare and Hounds, and call it a Deer Hunt to suit the Adirondacks. This paper’s the *scent*. About half a dozen of us will be the herd of deer, and the rest the hunters and hounds. The deer de-

cide on some goal—some good place for a picnic—miles away of course, but the hunters must n't know where it is. The deer have fifteen minutes start, and they choose the most round-about and puzzling course, and sprinkle the paper, and the hunters and hounds have to follow and trace them by it. Of course the deer try to keep out of sight all the time, and they cross all the brooks they can and make it as hard as possible for the hunters."

"The deer have the best of it. I'm thankful I'm one of the herd," said Carol.

"You won't be thankful if you're *shot*," returned Jean. "If the hunters reach the goal within thirty minutes after the deer, that counts as if they had shot them. We're to have a picnic at the goal—a regular hunters' spread."

Mollie and Barbara and their classmates hailed the plan with loud acclaim; and Carol was no less ready for the chase, though she inquired of the ardent young Dianas and their intended victims whether they had yet appealed to the higher authorities.

"Yes, we've spoken to Mother and Miss Lee, and they both think it's a fine idea," answered Cecily. "Miss Lee says she'll chaperon the hunters: she hopes they'll go slower than the deer. And Mother's going to have Pete and Hiram Bolster's boy bring the lunch to the goal, so that we need n't carry anything but

the bags of scent. We have to *run* whenever we can, you know, and when we can't we must walk very fast.”

“I hope it won't be terribly hot to-morrow,” sighed Blanche. “Jean always thinks of something so strenuous!”

“Well, I think we 'd better borrow Nanno's worsted reins, and invite the seniors to play horse!” said Evelyn. “This is the most infantile proceeding!”

“Dear me, Grandma! Why don't you go and spend the summer in an Old Ladies' Home!” exclaimed Hilda.

Evelyn pretended to ignore the remark, but she muttered, “I 'm afraid the seniors will suggest we take Mellin's Food for our Hunters' spread!”

“You don't know the grand old seniors, then, nor me either,” said Carol. “My sporting blood is stirring already. Why, my dear girl, this is no more infantile than Hare and Hounds! Didn't you ever read *Tom Brown's School Days*? Great big fellows nearly grown played Hare and Hounds at Rugby.”

“There now, Evelyn, it comes into *literature*! That ought to satisfy you,” cried Phyllis. “Evelyn's so mortally afraid of not acting grown-up enough! She proposed taking our kodaks and having a photographic picnic! But it would be dreadfully poky, wouldn't it, to

spend the whole time taking pictures! We want something snappy, with lots of *go* in it!"

"I 'm sure there 's plenty of *snap* about taking kodak pictures!" replied the Alruna, diplomatically, for she saw that Evelyn was hurt. "I 'm ready to be shot by the hunters, or *snap*-shot by the photographers—anything to oblige."

"Well, I don't believe I care to go on the hunt," began Evelyn.

"Oh, yes, yes, yes, you do!" Carol contradicted. "You 'll be as ready as anybody, when I toot you awake with the hunting-horn to-morrow morning. What 's more, you 'll have to be one of the deer; you 're one of our best runners."

Evelyn looked undecided. But when she had threatened to stay at home from the hunt, she had detected the Mouse clapping on the sly. She had made up her mind that she was a martyr, unloved and cruelly treated. Therefore she now betook herself to her own tent with a glum face, hearing, as she turned her back on the happy roomful, a suppressed but general giggle.

"The girls are crazy about that silly deer hunt just because Jean thought of it, and they snubbed the photographic picnic just because *I* proposed it," the voluntary exile told herself. "Jean 's popular, and I 'm *unpopular*—that 's

what it is! Everything Jean does is perfect; they simply kiss the ground she walks on; and everything *I* suggest is ‘poky’; and Frances and Phyllis make fun of it.”

The wounds inflicted by the Mouse and by blunt, outspoken Phyl smarted, as she recalled the laughter of the one and the frank comments of the other; and she failed to remember Jean’s eager “*I think a photographic picnic would be ever so nice. We must have one some day, anyhow!*” But she did remember the Alruna’s conciliating reference to her fleetness of foot, and as a result she did her full share of paper-tearing that evening.

The seniors, having returned from a cruise in the *Naiad*, accepted with alacrity the invitation to the hunt, and not one of them suggested an entrée of Mellin’s Food.

“ ‘A southerly wind and a cloudy sky
Proclaim it a hunting morning!
Before the sun rises away we fly,
Dull sleep in our downy beds scorning!
To horse, my brave boys, and away! away!
Bright Phoebus the hills is adorning.
The face of all nature looks gay, looks gay;
'T is a beautiful scent-laying morning!
Hark! hark! Forward! Tantara! Tantara! Tan-
tara! ’ ”

Carol’s clear voice began the good old hunting-song, as soon as the camp had been awak-

ened by the bugle-call, next day; and one tentful of girls after another took up the famous round. As a matter of fact the wind was *westerly*, and the morning clouds soon rolled away from the hill-tops, leaving the sky an undimmed blue. But that it was a "beautiful scent-laying morning," there was no gain-saying; and the turkey-red bags were ready and waiting, stuffed with the product of yesterday's toil.

All in the cool freshness of the young day the hunters and hounds and their quarries made ready to start. The best runners had been selected for the deer: Carol, Cecily and Jean, than whom there were none fleetier; nimble little Frances, so light on her feet that she seemed never to know fatigue; Mollie Tremaine, an equally nimble sprite; Barbara von Linden, merry, romping harum-scarum that she was; and Evelyn, thin, nervous, active, and by no means inclined to stay home from the chase.

The deer were ready for the signal. The carriers of the bags had strapped on their burdens. Carol took out her watch, that the herd might dart away at nine o'clock to the very second, and called for the third time, "Evelyn, hurry up!" Evelyn came speeding from her tent, slinging something across her shoulder.

"Evelyn Sherwood!" cried Jean, as her

cousin joined them, “What are you weighing yourself down with a kodak for?”

“I ’m not going to lose as good a day as this for taking pictures,” was Evelyn’s answer. “It ’s the first time for a week that we have n’t had either a rain or a haze. I ’ll photograph you all at the goal, and take some views on the way home.”

“You ’ll wish your kodak in the lake before you ’ve carried it a mile,” said Carol. “Leave it, and photograph the meet after we ’re home again: we ’ll pose for you. Why, where ’s your sweater?”

“I don’t need it. And the kodak won’t weigh me down if I don’t bother with a sweater too,” Evelyn answered.

“I ’m afraid this artistic deer will *have* to bother with a sweater,” said Carol. “You ’ll be overheated after the hunt and catch cold if you don’t wrap up. Fly back and get it. Quick! Time ’s up, all but two minutes.”

“No, I don’t need it at all. I never feel chilly,” replied Evelyn, without stirring.

“Evelyn, get your sweater immediately!” said Miss Lee, who was waiting with the hunters and hounds. When Miss Lee spoke in that tone it was the part of wisdom to obey without demur, and Evelyn did so, returning with both sweater and kodak. The minute hand of

Carol's watch arrived at nine. "Go!" called the leader of the deer, and off they started, while Miss Lee, surrounded by the hunters and the pack, studied her own watch, and Stella, not strong enough to join in her Queen's strenuous amusements, held in check Roderick Dhu, who was entering a whining protest against being withheld from the chase.

Across the road the deer dashed, and plunged into the forest, Cecily scattering the first handfuls of scent. The goal was to be the Flume, a wild, deep gorge through which a foaming brook rushed on its turbulent course. One would have thought that Troublesome Path, the nearest way thither, was tortuous and bewildering enough, but the mischievous deer had resolved to torment the hunters to the utmost, and frisked along a variety of puzzling trails before finally heading toward the Flume.

CHAPTER XII

THE CHASE

THE genius of Sir Walter Scott would have been needed worthily to recount the story of that chase. In the woods stratagem took the place of speed. The deer crossed a brook on stepping-stones to throw the hounds off the scent; they sprinkled paper delusively along the beginning of one trail, then, doubling on their tracks, ran back and set off in an opposite direction, which brought them out presently in an open pasture. A cross-country scamper followed, witnessed by a group of mildly astonished cows; then a scramble over a stone wall, and a backward glance to see if the hunters were in view.

“Botheration! Both my shoes are untied!” Down knelt Jean, to secure her shoe-laces in Gordian knots. The others paused beside her, behind the shelter of the wall, not sorry to let the thumping of their hearts subside a little. They were on the edge of a field which sloped down to the border of a tract of woodland, offering a fresh covert to the deer. To the right was a low hill, upon which stood a

famous barn. Its eccentric owner had built it around the trunk of a tall beech tree, whose branches shaded the roof.

"I *must* have a photograph of that barn, with the tree growing out of it!" said Evelyn. "Let 's run over there—we 've plenty of time!"

"Oh, Evelyn! We haven't! We couldn't possibly go way over there!" cried Cecily.

"No, indeed!" said Carol. "The hounds may come out of the woods any minute and see us."

"No, they won't, for ever so long," Evelyn asserted positively. "We 've left them a good mile behind, I 'm sure."

"If they 're a quarter of a mile behind we 'll be lucky," answered Carol. "There 's no time to dilly-dally!"

"Ev, you 've gone kodak crazy!" laughed Jean. "There, my old laces won't come untied again in a hurry! Come on, girls!"

Carol gave the word "Forward! Make a dash for the woods!" and five of the herd shot off down the slope. But Evelyn tarried. "You run on," she said, "and I 'll follow you up. It won't take any time at all to go just to the barn and back."

"We can't leave you behind, Evelyn! It 's against the rules," said Carol. "Now don't be a balky little deer, or you 'll find yourself in

a hunter's game-bag before you know it! That barn has n't wings to fly away with! You'll find it waiting for you if you don't come back for a month! Come now, hurry! We must catch up-with the others."

"I want to take the photograph to-day, so as to send it off in a letter," replied Evelyn. The little black box had beaten a spiteful rub-a-dub-dub on her back as she ran, and she was the more determined to have as much good as possible out of her self-imposed burden. She took a step in the direction of the barn, but Carol arrested her with military promptness and decision.

"You must *not*, Evelyn! You know very well it's against the rules for any girl to wander off by herself."

"That's the most absurd rule! I'm not to be trusted to take two steps by myself, but if a girl hardly older than myself goes with me, she's supposed to be able to protect me simply because she's called an *instructor*!"

The cheeks of the girlish instructor, glowing as they were from her run, flamed hotter still; yet she answered quietly: "I may not be so very much older than you, but that has nothing to do with it. I'm in charge of you, and I will not allow you to break the rules. You *must* come! And if you delay any longer the hunters will overtake us, and the game will be

spoiled, and you 'll find yourself rather an unpopular person, I 'm afraid. You know you don't want *that*, so come—quick! we haven't a minute to lose!"

"I 'd have been pretty nearly there and back, if we hadn't stopped to argue!" muttered Evelyn.

While this altercation was in progress Jean glanced back in her race down the slope and came to a standstill. "Carol and Evelyn aren't coming!" she called. Frances heard and stopped too. Both girls guessed the cause of the delay.

"There! I knew Grandma 'd have a fit just in the worst place!" exclaimed the Mouse.

Jean darted back to assist in bringing Evelyn to terms, but before she reached them she saw both girls suddenly duck their heads, and then come flying down the slope. Jean turned once more, and all three fled to the shelter of the woods, where they found the rest of the deer impatiently waiting.

"They 're coming! We heard them hallooing!" panted Carol. "We must try to throw them off the scent!"

"I know how!" said Cecily. "Down this way—quick!" Cecily was a true daughter of the forest, familiar with all the tricks of the woods. "Into this brush, hurry! hurry!" They pushed their way through a dense thicket,

which they trusted would be sufficient to hide all traces of the bits of paper they conscientiously dropped. Emerging from this, after heroic struggles, they dashed onward through the woods with redoubled speed, avoiding trails as more likely to betray them. Faintly in the distance they heard the hounds in full cry, and on they fled, indulging in many a ruse, twisting and winding hither and thither, till suddenly they came out upon Troublesome Path.

The voices of the hunters were no longer heard, and the deer laughed merrily at the thought of their pursuers thrown off the track and standing nonplussed, not knowing which way to turn. They tore along the trail, and by and by a dull roaring sounded through the trees. It was the voice of Foaming Brook, and the path led them to its brink.

"This bank gets higher and higher till you look over a regular precipice—that's the beginning of the wall of the Flume," Cecily explained to the uninitiated.

"The Flume! the Flume! The scene of my worst scrape!" blissfully murmured the Mouse. "I ran away to the Flume last summer, Ev, and Jean got lost trying to save me! Sweet, sweet memories!" She ran on ahead, with eager Barbara at her heels.

"Thank fortune, we're near the goal!"

sighed Evelyn. "I 'm worn out with this tire-some old sweater! It 's caught on every single thing I 've passed since I started!" Angrily she retied the sweater girded about her waist; then furtively readjusted her kodak-strap for about the twentieth time. Third in line she plodded on, till a shriek behind her gave warning that some one was in yet deeper affliction. Startled, she turned. The next instant there was a wild chorus of, "Hornets! Hornets! Run for your lives!" The rear guard was charging up the trail, Mollie with her hands before her face, and Carol, Jean, and Cecily beating the air frantically with their bags. Poor Mollie in a luckless moment had spied a piece of bright orange fungus clinging to a tree trunk, and stepping from the path to secure the prize, she had intruded upon a nest of yellow-jackets who flew out to repel the invader. Mollie fled back shrieking, and Carol sprang to her defense. In another moment the others were battling to save themselves from their airy foe, and all four were fleeing as they fought.

One glimpse was enough for Evelyn. She sped panic-stricken after Barbara and Frances, who at the alarm cry had broken into headlong flight. But she turned again, halting at a wary distance, at a call from Carol.

The battle was over, and Carol was examin-

ing Mollie's face and hands. Frances and Barbara were out of hearing already, but she called to Evelyn: "Poor Mollie's badly stung! I'll have to stop and see what I can do for her. Don't any of you go out on the Natural Bridge, for the world! Tell Frances and Bab I say they *must not*! Hurry up and catch them before they get there, or Frisk'll be out on it as sure as fate!"

Carol had been determined to run no risk of accidents, and before starting on the hunt she had said to the girls, "If any of you reach the Flume ahead of me, don't do any climbing or exploring, and don't go out on the Natural Bridge, whatever you do!" Now, having repeated her order, she set to work to find some moist clay for the stings.

"Come down to the brook, girls, and I'll poultice you with mud. Now let's see how many more fatalities there are. Poor Queenie, a hornet kissed you affectionately on the cheek, didn't he?"

"One kissed my hand, too, but I smashed him with my bag!" answered Jean.

"And I'm stung on the tip of my ear," said Cecily. "Are you stung too, Carol?"

"A couple roosted sociably on my arm, and two of their friends perched on the nape of my neck," replied Carol, as they scrambled down to the brook. "Joy! Here's some

beautiful mud!" she exclaimed. "Hold out your poor little paws, Mollie!"

"Oh, my poor face and hands!" moaned the hornets' worst-used victim. "I never felt anything hurt so before! It's ten kinds of pain rolled into one!"

"We paid the yellow-jackets back anyway! What luck we had the bags!" said Cecily.

"Some brave battle maids
Met the hornet brigades!"

declaimed Jean. She laid a lump of mud on Cecily's ear, and the maid of honor applied a wet brown daub to the purple mountain rising on the royal cheek. The pathos of the scene drove all four sufferers into a paroxysm of merriment, notwithstanding the ache and burn of their hurts; and between anguish and her sense of the ridiculous poor Mollie became hysterical, laughing and crying at once.

"We must put up a sign, so the hunters and hounds won't encounter the 'hornet brigades,'" said Carol.

Cecily discovered a large fungus with a surface as smooth as a writing tablet. "Don't touch it!" Mollie besought. "Don't stir up any *more* hornets!" But no ambushed enemy flew forth to stab, as it was being dislodged. And while Carol applied mud poultices to Mollie's

face and hands, Cecily, with a hatpin, pricked on the fungus this message of warning:

DANGER! HORNETS!!! BEWARE!

HERD OF DEER FATALLY STUNG!

This notice she placed on the trail below the site of the tragedy, boldly risking another attack of the foe, and then the wounded rear guard hurried after the others.

Frances and Barbara had been too swift for Evelyn, and her message was still undelivered when she reached the Flume. It was a grand scene. Ages had rolled by while that gorge was forming. Little by little the rush of waters had carved a channel through the living rock. Now, Foaming Brook roared between two frowning walls. This was the beginning of the "Flume," and where the precipice rose highest there stretched across the gorge a bridge of rock, left poised high above the noisy waters when all beneath it had been worn away. At this wild spot Nature had proved herself the most fantastic of architects. Like the Pharaohs she had commemorated herself in pyramids of stone, and she had even carved a rude flight of steps leading down to the brink of the racing stream.

To-day, from the unbroken blue overhead the sun was pouring, painting a rainbow for

itself upon the clouds of spray which rose from the cascades and tumbling rapids. Barbara was gazing at the heavenly arc. She had stepped down from the trail to the edge, and stood between twin white birches, her arms around the slender trunks.

Evelyn did not stop to watch the rainbow, for her attention was attracted by the figure of a bold adventuress making her way to the opposite side of the Flume. Scorning the wooden "Mosquito Bridge" farther up the gorge, Frances had gone half across the Natural Bridge already. The Mouse regarded the veto on climbing as intended for the raw recruits, but not applicable to a veteran like herself; and Carol's words had long since vanished from her mind. Evelyn saw her gain the opposite side and set off toward the Pyramid Rocks. Too late to recall her now! What then should Evelyn do with herself? She had just seen it demonstrated that the rock bridge was safe, provided one had a steady head. But according to orders she was to stay meekly with Barbara, in obedience to—whom? A girl not yet out of her teens! "I am in charge of you," nineteen-year-old Carol had said. In charge of Evelyn Sherwood, who had passed her sixteenth birthday a week ago! And this was not school-time, either—it was vacation!

Just then Barbara turned and, seeing her, called, "Evelyn, come here and look at the rainbow! Where are the others?"

"They stopped to get some mud for Mollie—she was pretty badly stung."

"Poor Pollykins!" exclaimed Barbara. "I was so scared when I heard them cry 'Hornets!' that I just tore on and never stopped to see what was happening. I do hope they'll come quick and not lose this gorgeous rainbow. Oh, look! look! There are *two* rainbows now!"

But Evelyn did not stop to admire the glowing colors in the mist. "Bab, don't you go out on the Natural Bridge!" she commanded, and turned away. Heedless of Barbara's sarcastic "Oh, indeed!" and in haste to overtake Frances, she hurried on to the rocky arch that spanned the gorge. Out she stepped on the forbidden bridge. It was fairly wide, and she walked on fearlessly, but stopped midway to gaze on the water, churned into foam. Recent rains had swollen the brook to a madly rushing torrent, and her airy position high above it held a hint of danger just sufficient to thrill her with a glorious sense of exhilaration. How the rapids leaped over the stones! How they eddied and swirled, seething and hissing! She grew fascinated, until at last a horror began to mingle with the enchantment. The whir-

ling of the waters became dizzying; their roaring filled her ears and bewildered her brain. The temptation seized her to poise herself on the very edge of the rock pathway. With a strong effort she broke the spell. Turning her eyes away she set her feet firmly in the middle of the path, which now seemed none too wide, and looking straight ahead walked quickly on to the end of the bridge.

Evelyn drew a long breath of relief. She was in no haste to return that way. She saw Frances scale one pyramid and disappear over its top. She looked back, and to her horror saw Barbara crouching on the bridge, half-way across.

The rainbows had faded, and Bab, as forgetful of orders as Frances, had made haste to follow on the track of the two older girls. But her head was not so steady, and she had ventured but a few steps when the sense that she was all alone, with no helping hand near, came upon her with unpleasant force. Giddiness began to creep over her, but she had no mind to be beaten by Evelyn. Bravely she kept on until, as she glanced from the dizzying water to the sky, and then down again to the tumbling rapids, the spell that had fallen upon Evelyn laid hold of Barbara, but with greater power. It seemed to her that if she watched that surg-

ing stream an instant longer she would surely be drawn over into its depths. Trembling she sank down upon the bridge, her eyes closed.

“Barbara! Don’t be frightened! I’m coming!” The girl had crouched there but a moment when she heard the call. Carol had reached the bridge. “Stay still—don’t move!” she commanded. “I’ll bring you back safely!” Swiftly she ran to Barbara’s side and laid her hand on the shoulder of the frightened girl. “Here I am, Babbie! What’s happened to you?”

“I’m dizzy. I can’t go on and I can’t turn around!”

“Yes, you can, if I help you. Give me your hand and I’ll steer you around. Keep your eyes shut if you feel dizzy, till I have you headed for port.”

The easy gaiety of her rescuer steadied Barbara’s nerves. She held out an ice-cold hand, and grasping it firmly Carol turned her about in the right direction. “Now you’d better *crawl* back,” said she. “I’ll walk sideways, just a step in front of you, and you can clutch my dress for consolation, whenever you like. Shall I lead you by your pigtail?” Merrily she took the end of the long braid, and they went back, Barbara creeping on hands and knees, and preferring to keep her eyes upon

Carol's skirt instead of on the rapids. Safely they reached the bank where the other three were waiting.

"Bab, what do you mean by disobeying your captain's orders?" Carol demanded, when she had helped her pupil to her feet.

"Orders?" Barbara repeated. "I didn't know you gave any!"

Carol reminded her of the commands given before they left camp, and saw dismay overspread her face.

"Oh, I *do* remember now! But I forgot all about it," said Bab, penitently. "I was so excited about the hunt."

"But didn't Evelyn give you my message about not crossing the Natural Bridge?" asked Carol.

"She didn't tell me *you* said not to!" cried Barbara. "I wouldn't have gone a step if I'd known it was a message from *you*! Indeed, indeed I wouldn't, Miss Armstrong! But all she said was, 'Don't you go out on the Natural Bridge,' and I thought she was just trying to show she was older than I; she's always trying to act grown-up. And of course I wasn't going to obey *her*! But I wouldn't disobey *you* for the world!"

"I don't believe she told Frances either," put in Jean.

"Frances was half way across before she got

here," answered Barbara. "And then Evelyn went across, and I thought if they both could do it, I could. I'm *very* sorry! Oh, dear! You've been stung, too, haven't you, Miss Armstrong!" she added, noticing Carol's wounds. "Does n't it hurt you dreadfully?"

"Look at poor Mollie; she's a pitiful object!" said Carol, not sorry to see Barbara so hopeful a penitent. "Think how we were suffering while you law-breakers were sporting at the Flume! Come along now, girls; we must cross Mosquito Bridge and catch Frances and Evelyn before anything worse happens. And now, Bab, listen to me: I know you're sorry, but you *must* keep that memory of yours in better working-order, or some day you'll find yourself rolling down a mountain-side, like poor Douglas Gordon last year. You remember, don't you, the camp penalty for disobeying orders, even when it comes from forgetfulness?"

"Lose the next excursion," replied Barbara gloomily.

"Yes, Bab, we shall have to leave you at home next time. Now give me your word of honor that while we're at the Flume you will keep close to *me*. If I find you forgetting, and starting off on any more self-conducted tours, I'll invite *you* to a solemn and awful *con-con*; and after this, when we excursionize I'll leave your

ladyship behind in the paddock, tethered with Zillie!"

"I promise solemnly on my word of honor!" declared Barbara. "I'll be a regular 'Mary's little lamb' after this! Honor bright I will! You're not *really* angry with me, are you, Miss Armstrong, dear? And you'll let me have that con-con with you this evening, just the same, won't you? Not a solemn and awful one, but a *nice* one? You promised me yesterday, you know."

"Did I make such a promise?" Carol knitted her brows in well-feigned perplexity and surprise. And all the satisfaction that Bab could win from her adored instructor was, "My memory *may* be as short as yours!"

It was a sadder and a wiser Barbara with whom Carol did hold a decidedly solemn confab on the subject of forgetfulness and running into danger, as they went on to the safer crossing. Mosquito Bridge looked not unlike a colossal image of the pest of summer-time, for it was but two planks wide and raised on long poles; but though lightly built and narrow, it had good high railings to which Barbara clung as they passed above the rapids once more.

Evelyn had been an anxious witness of Bab's adventure, but now that it was over she had no

desire to face her commanding officer. She preferred to take snap-shots of the Natural Bridge, and she was busy with photography when the procession filed up to her and halted.

"Evelyn, you didn't tell me that *Miss Armstrong* said I wasn't to cross the Natural Bridge!" burst out Barbara. "I'd never have done it if I'd known!"

"I told you you were not to go out on it, and you ought to have understood," returned Evelyn sharply.

"Girls, please go and hunt up a good place to have luncheon," said Carol hastily. "And do see where Frances has gone!"

Tactful Cecily hurried Barbara and Mollie away, but Jean foresaw trouble, and she was not going to abandon Carol to the mercy of the rebel. Retreating a step or two, she lingered ready to interpose.

"I *told* Bab not to cross the bridge, and she ought to have minded!" began Evelyn.

"But you crossed it yourself, in direct disobedience to orders," said Carol. "How could you expect her not to follow your lead? She did *not* understand, and she had forgotten what I said earlier. She saw you go, and she went after you. Did you see what happened? She became fearfully dizzy, and if she hadn't been sensible enough to crouch down as she did, she

would probably have fallen and been swept away in those rapids! And *you* would have been responsible!"

The voice, low and earnest, and the steady look, had kept Evelyn silent while Carol spoke, but now the girl flamed out into angry defiance.

"It was n't my responsibility at all! And I don't see any reason in the world why I should obey you! I'm quite capable of taking care of myself. I'm quite old enough. And you're not a *real* teacher, anyway! I'm too old to be bound down to a girl of your age!"

Carol was quick-tempered by nature and Evelyn saw her eyes flash; but it was not from her that the swift answer came. Her lips were firmly closed, but Jean had heard enough. Indignantly she faced her cousin. Carol laid a hand on her arm and tried her best to check her. But Jean was a rebel herself, through very loyalty, and nothing could silence her till she had said her say.

"Evelyn Sherwood, don't you ever speak like that to Carol again! She is a real teacher! And she's here in Miss Hamersley's place. She's our Alruna too, and you belong to the Order, and you're bound to stand by her and do what she says! Don't you remember? We passed a law that we'd all of us obey her if she came up here! And instead of that you're behaving horridly to her! You've been spoil-

ing her whole day! As if she did n't have troubles enough already!"

"Jean, won't you please go and find Frances right away? I don't want anything more to happen," said Carol. "*Please* go!"

Jean understood the look, and obeyed, for she saw that Carol wished to fight her battle alone.

"Oh, that Silver Sword! I'm sick of hearing about it!" Evelyn flung after her Queen. She would have been glad to walk away too, but Carol turned to her again, speaking in the same low voice.

"Evelyn, you are one of the older girls; and that is all the more reason why you should stand by me and uphold my authority, and give the younger ones a good object lesson of law and order. That is what the whole senior class agreed to do. The younger girls look up to you older ones, and as they watch you they are influenced for good or bad. You may be quite capable of taking care of yourself, but if there were no other reason, you ought to obey orders for their sakes and the good of the whole camp. Here you all are—a great camp-full of girls—always out on the lake or roaming in the woods. If you don't obey as promptly and faithfully as a regiment of soldiers, we can have no safeguard against serious accident."

Evelyn looked down. Carol's eyes rested on

the badge which the rebellious battle maid wore. "Evelyn, you may be tired of hearing about the Silver Sword, but still you and I both wear it—the sword of love. And we wear the golden shield too—the shield of truth and honor and *loyalty*. The members of the Order have made it their aim to be an influence for good, wherever they can, and to be loving and loyal to each other. I know I'm a girl only three years older than you, but I'm in authority over you here, and as a point of honor you are bound to obey me. Evelyn, won't you be loyal to me?"

There was an appeal in Carol's voice that made her sullen listener look up at the question and meet the gaze of the deep, earnest eyes. Evelyn dropped her own again. "I didn't intend to be disloyal to you," she murmured. Then she turned and walked away, nor could Carol tell whether or not there had been any surrender.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MOUSE-TRAP

CECILY, Mollie, and Barbara started in quest of Frances, and scrambled over the boulders till they reached the Terraces—broad expanses of rock on the edge of the Flume. The nearest terrace ended in a precipitous incline reaching to the water below, and here they discovered the Mouse, standing on the very edge of the steep. Cecily hailed her according to the favorite Huairarwee method. Laying her hands together and blowing into the crevice between her thumbs she woke the echoes with a shrill whistle. Frances looked back and returned the salute.

“How are the yellow-jackets? Anybody stung?” she called.

“Yes, every one of us,” answered Cecily. “And Bab nearly fell off the Natural Bridge!”

“Fury! Did she?” ejaculated the Mouse. “I must hurry up and have an accident, too.”

Another shrill whistle was heard. Cecily and her companions saw Jean approaching the

terrace. They went back to meet her, but when they turned once more Frances had disappeared!

"Here I *be!*" called a voice from the depths. They hurried to the brink and looked over. Behold, down in the abyss the Mouse awaited them, standing knee deep in a pool at the foot of the incline. A perpendicular rock shut in this pool on the opposite side, cutting it off from the main channel of the brook. The pool was fed by a silvery thread of water that came slipping down between the walls of rock.

Barbara uttered a shriek of delight. "Hooray! You 're in a worse scrape than I was!"

Cecily looked aghast. "Frisky Brown! How did you get way down there? Did you slip?"

"My wish came true! I've had my accident!" Frances responded, placidly.

"Well, it served you good and right for being a disobedient child!" declared Cecily.

"I think it 's a shame, the way you girls are behaving! Poor Carol's hair will be gray before night!" exclaimed Jean. And the next minute an anxious voice calling, "Where's Frances? Can't you find her?" told them that Carol herself was coming.

"We *have* found her! She 's—she 's in wading!" Jean called back, but the laughter in her voice warned Carol to expect a new act in

the drama. In a moment she was beside the others.

“Well, Frances, I’m only surprised that I don’t find you plunging down the largest cascade! How did you accomplish *this* feat?”

“I slid down, and I can’t get up again!”

“Are you hurt?”

“Dashed to atoms!” replied Frances, with serenity. “I’ll be very solemn all my life after this. I’ve smashed both my funny-bones!” She rubbed her bruised elbows vigorously.

“Well, this *is* an appropriate ending to our chapter of accidents!” Carol observed.

“It was almost the ending of *me*,” answered the Mouse. “I just wanted to see how far I could walk down the rock. I forgot I had to walk up again, and I had n’t taken three steps when I slipped, and down I slid, and now I can’t climb out! I shall have to camp here the rest of my life. Ochone! Ochone! You’ll have to lower a lunch-pail to me every day!”

“You richly deserve to spend your days there!” said the offended Alruna. “And if we can’t haul you up ourselves, you *will* have to stay down there awhile.” She knelt on the edge of the declivity and leaned over. “Girls, take hold of me, tight, so she won’t pull *me* in too. Now, Frances, let’s see if I can reach you.”

"I think I'd better wait till Douglas and Jack can come with a stretcher," said the Mouse, who was enjoying herself hugely. "I didn't tell you—because I never complain—but I've *dislocated both my feet!*"

"Mercy, Frisk!" cried Cecily. "Did you really twist your ankles?"

"You don't look as if the agony was particularly excruciating," remarked Carol. "But your diagnosis proves that you're *cracked*, whatever else is the matter with you. *Ankles* are the things you dislocate—not feet."

"Yes, feet too!" Frances insisted. "Foot-dislocations are the most dangerous of any. *Locate* means to *place*, and *dislocate* means to *displace*—I learned that ages ago. Well, I located my feet on the edge of the terrace, and then I slipped and they're way down here at the bottom of the pool, now. If that was n't a dislocation, what is?"

"You're cut out for a surgeon," Carol acknowledged. "Perhaps you can tell me whether crossing the Natural Bridge was n't a *fracture* of the *law*? Now we'll see whether we can dislocate you from the pool."

Frances raised her arms high above her head; Carol stretched hers downward, and they found that they could just clasp hands. "Now, then, see if you can get a foothold while we have a good grip of each other!" Frances

tried her best. While her hands clutched Carol's fast, her poor little feet made heroic efforts to lodge themselves upon the slippery rock. But the only result was that, although the others clung to the Alruna, Carol was nearly dragged down into the pool.

"No use!" sighed the prisoner. "Jean, if you 'll slide down here, I 'll climb up on your shoulders and get out."

"Thanks for the invitation, but I 'd rather stay here and watch your struggles," replied Jean.

"Cecily, go and get Evelyn," said Carol. "We 'll have to make a chain of ourselves, but if it is n't long enough to reach to that tree we may not have purchase enough to pull her up. If we can't, then we 'll have to wait for the rest of the girls, or till Pete and Hiram come with the luncheon. Now, Frisky Mouse, attention! Your misdeeds have landed you in a trap at last, and there I 'm going to leave you for the rest of your life unless you promise *never* to disobey orders again! How did you *dare* to cross that bridge after all my commands this morning?"

"Don't look so stern, Alruna! I cannot bear thy frown!" pleaded Frances. "I 've been too much in the sun without my hat, and the remembering part of my brain has melted."

"And the common sense part too, or you

would n't have tried to walk down a wall as slippery as a pane of glass!" said Carol. "As soon as I get you on dry land again, I'll give you a scolding that ought to last you for several years! Dear me! I thought I was going to have an easy time of it as leader of the deer, but I really believe I'd rather have charge of the whole pack of hounds, with Nanno and my small brother thrown in! After all I said this morning, I came out of a battle with hornets to find Bab stuck in the middle of the Natural Bridge, so dizzy she couldn't move, Evelyn across already, and *you* shooting the chutes into the brook! Do you think my position's an enviable one? I only wish you were in my place!"

"I only wish you were in *mine*!" responded the occupant of the pool.

"I'll drop you from the Order if you don't promise on your honor to obey Carol after this!" exclaimed Jean.

"I promise on my honor as a Brown Mouse!" fervently declared Frances.

"It must be on your honor as a *battle maid* or you stay in the pool for good!" said her majesty.

"On my honor as a model battle maid I promise to cling to my beloved Alruna's apron strings forever, and live an example to my Queen!" So vowed the Mouse. Copiously she

doused her cheeks with water from the brook, that tears of contrition might be seen, and piteously she implored, "Oh, dearest Alruna, forgive! Forget!"

"I 'll forgive and *you 'll* forget!" returned Carol, laughing. "But I will *not* forget to leave you and Evelyn at home with Bab on our next excursion day." At which Culprit No. 1 danced a jig!

When Cecily arrived with Evelyn, Carol told the girls to see whether they could form a chain long enough for the last in line to pass her arm around the nearest tree, but they found that one more link was needed. They made a brave attempt, however, to raise Frances without the aid of the tree. Carol collected all the belts of the company, to make herself a strong girdle. Jean gripped this with one hand and gave her other to Cecily. The chain was formed and the girls pulled with all their might, but they found it hard to keep their footing on the sloping terrace, and there was no raising Frances.

"I 'm sorry, Mousie, but you 'll have to wait in the trap till the hunters come up," said Carol. "It won't mend matters if you drag me overboard, and make me pull the others in after me."

"If you all fall in, the heap *might* be high enough for me to crawl out on!" replied Frances, hopefully. But her would-be rescuers

did not seem ambitious to try the experiment.

Now, for the first time in the history of hunting, the deer longed for their pursuers to appear. Jean and Cecily, choosing the tallest of the Pyramid Rocks for a watch-tower, mourned to each other: "Why did n't we sprinkle the scent thicker? *Why* did we try so hard to puzzle them?"

Down in her watery prison Frances was only cool enough to be comfortable, but she called up to Evelyn, "Hey, Grandma! You said you did n't need your sweater! Throw it down, so I can have it around my ankles! I'm catching the rheumatiz!"

"Hurry up and photograph me, Granny!" she next besought. "Carol feels blue and I feel *black-and-blue*, and it'll cheer us up! Catch hold of me, Alruna: you must be taken saving my life!"

"If I could catch you by the shoulders you'd be 'shaken before taken,' " declared Carol. "A dose of Frisky Mouse on top of hornet stings is n't exactly soothing to the temper."

She consented to pose, however, and the late excitement had so far dispelled Evelyn's "fit," for the time being, that she took the Mouse in half a dozen dramatic attitudes.

But the time of imprisonment was rapidly drawing to a close. The watchers on the pyramid presently sighted in the distance the fore-

most of the hunters and hounds, as they arrived on the opposite side of the Flume. Jean and Cecily raised a shout and waved their arms. An answering cry came back, and the foremost of the hunting-party crossed the Mosquito Bridge and gained the Terraces.

“Come and look at the Mouse-trap!” called Carol.

“Dickery, dickery dock!

The Mouse slid down the rock!”

said Jean, as the new arrivals reached the spot and looked down laughing at the captive.

With this reinforcement the girls were able to form a double chain reaching from the tree to the edge of the terrace.

“Now, girls, get ready! A long pull, and a strong pull, and a pull all together!” said Carol. All together they pulled, and the rest of the hunting-party arrived at Mosquito Bridge in time to behold Frances drawn up, over the slippery wall of her prison, and landed safely on the rock above.

“Frances, what wild escapade have you been indulging in now?” inquired Miss Lee, as the whole band gathered around the dripping Mouse.

“I was doing my best to please my Alruna,” meekly responded Frances. “She gave orders

not to do any climbing, so I put myself in a safe place where I couldn't possibly climb. But I don't think she's *quite* as pleased as she ought to be."

The chase was over. The hunters had arrived five minutes too late to congratulate themselves on having shot their game. All that remained now was to dry the Mouse and await the luncheon bringers. Carol soon had a fire built, and Frances, shoeless and stockingless, was warming herself before the comforting blaze. The Alruna then addressed herself to the frisky battle maid with much severity.

"Now, Mouse, while I have you toasting, I'm going to give you the supreme scolding of your life!"

"No, no, no, no! you're not! I don't want to be scolded any more than you want to scold me! And you know you love me to distraction!"

"I feel more distraction than love, at present!" replied Carol. The Mouse was a prime favorite with the Alruna, but she was not going to allow partiality to interfere with her sermon. "Now, Frances, seriously—"

"No, no, no, *not* seriously—I won't be scolded! But Carol, honestly I *did* forget, or I wouldn't have danced across that bridge!"

"No, Frances, I'm sure you wouldn't. But you *mustn't* forget. How can I ex-

pect the younger girls to obey orders if my own battle maids are n't loyal to me?"

"*Me* not loyal!" Frances fairly shrieked. "Why, Carol Armstrong, I 'd follow you down a chute a mile long!"

"I don't doubt that," answered Carol, laughing. "I know you 're as loyal at heart as Jean herself. I couldn't ask for a stauncher little comrade than you really are. But don't you see, Frisky, if your loyalty does n't shine out in your actions, the world in general *may* think it does n't exist!"

"True!" quoth the Mouse, meditatively. "That never struck me before! Well, after this I 'll shine so bright you 'll have to put on smoked glasses. Now, don't lecture any more, because I 'm going to be a regular paragon! And honestly, I would n't do anything to bother you for the world! I love you like fun, you precious old lamb! Let me kiss that sublime curl!" Thereupon Frances melodramatically pressed to her lips the bright ringlet over Carol's ear.

Thus the Mouse, refusing to accept a scolding, received none; and her laughing instructor was obliged to substitute for it a slap on one cheek and a kiss on the other.

When the luncheon arrived it was laid out upon the terrace near the bonfire. Jean had sighed for a pasty of venison, as the only suit-

able dish for a main course, and, as the nearest approach to it, the cook had made chicken pies, on which hunters, hounds, and deer regaled themselves with equal relish.

The banquet over, the girls explored the region of the Flume from end to end. There were no more plunges into pools however, and no accidents. The Natural Bridge was crossed again, but only by those whose heads were steady, and always under the safe conduct of Carol or Miss Lee. Evelyn declined the invitation to pass over that airy way a second time. The sight of it was distasteful to her now. She had grown ashamed and sorry, but nothing would have induced her to confess as much to Carol; above all she would not have had Jean suspect the truth. Resentment rankled as she thought of her cousin's indignant words that morning. What right had Jean to interfere? It was no affair of *hers*. But of course that child imagined that she might meddle in everybody's concerns, simply because she was Queen!

CHAPTER XIV

TATTLING TONGUES

EVELYN was reading in the hammock at the Lennox bungalow the next day. She was still in a contrary mood, and preferred the quiet of Rest-a-bit to the fun at Huairarwee. The sound of hoofs and the ring of voices made her glance up from her book. Douglas, on Court's black horse, Cyclone, and Jean on Hiawatha, were coming back from their morning's ride together. Jean had completed her lessons in horsemanship, and, under Court's tutelage, had learned to leap, as a crowning accomplishment. Douglas was proud indeed of his "sister" to-day, for she had taken a fence—a low one, to be sure—almost as gallantly as Carol herself.

"Douglas, let's get up a riding-party next week," Jean proposed, as they dismounted at the veranda steps. "If Jack wants to ride Cyclone you can hire another horse. Don't you think it would be fun?"

"Great! They charge pretty steep for horses, though," said Douglas, dubiously

"I 'm afraid I 'd better wait till I 'm a little more flush."

"Why, you old miser!" laughed Jean. "You 're as rich as Crœsus! Look at all the money you have, tucked away in the bank!" For with his earnings of the summer before, together with what he had made at school by tutoring younger boys, and the generous allowance given him by Mr. Lennox, the lad had contrived to place a tidy little fortune in the Savings Bank. "Two hundred dollars, is n't it?" she asked.

"I 'm afraid my bank account does n't make much of a show, now!" replied Douglas, with an embarrassed laugh.

"You extravagant boy! Have you used it up already?"

"Why, yes," he admitted. "I 'm dead broke! I had to draw it all out at once. Something came up that I had to use it for suddenly."

"Oh, Douglas! What?"

He colored. "Why, Jean—I really can't explain, but it 's all right."

Jean looked at him wonderingly.

"I know it sounds queer, and I 'd tell you all about it if I could, and you 'd see it was O. K. But there 's a reason why I can't. It 's all right though." He looked her steadily in the eyes.

“Of course it ’s all right or you would n’t have done it!” said Jean, loyally; but she had a sudden sense of being shut out from confidence, and she was too proud to press into the secret. Douglas led the horses away to the stable, and Jean as she went up the steps noticed, for the first time, Evelyn in the hammock, screened by the honeysuckles.

Mr. and Mrs. Lennox were going away that day for a fortnight’s journey. In the afternoon Carol and Cecily, who had run in to wish the travelers a pleasant trip, were standing with Jean and Evelyn on the veranda. Douglas had just mounted Cyclone to ride him back to Hurricane.

“What a fine, manly-looking fellow he is!” exclaimed Carol, as they watched the tall lad cantering down the road. “And he ’s the most dependable boy, too, is n’t he!”

“Hm—I should n’t call him very dependable,” said Evelyn, “using all his money up at once! And he can’t even explain what he did with it!”

“Why, Evelyn Sherwood, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, saying such a thing about Douglas!” cried Jean. “He would n’t do *anything* that was n’t right! It was his own money to do what he liked with, anyway. And we did n’t ask *you* to listen!”

“Well, I ’d like to know who could help hear-

ing when you stood right there talking!" Evelyn retorted.

"I don't care! It 's all right whatever he did with the money!" declared Jean, excitedly.

"Come here, lassie," called Mr. Lennox from the parlor window, "and tell me what the trouble is."

With an indignant look at her cousin, Jean went into the bungalow and repeated to her father and mother her conversation with Douglas. "And *you* trust him too, don't you?" she asked anxiously, for her father's grave look startled her. "Father, *please* say you trust him!"

"You 're a loyal little lassie!" said her father. "Don't worry about Douglas. He 'll explain it all satisfactorily, I 'm sure." But as Jean left the room she heard him say to her mother, "I hope we haven't spoiled the boy. I don't want to see him extravagant."

"There, Evelyn! you 've gone and worried Father just as he 's going away! But he *knows* it 's really all right," cried Jean, as she returned to the veranda. Then seeing Carol and Cecily just starting back to Huairarwee, she ran after them. "Did she say anything more about Douglas?" she asked.

"Never mind what she said, Little Sister," answered Carol. "*We* know he 's honorable through and through."

A few days later Douglas set Jean's loyal heart beating high with exultation at her hero's prowess, for he won the "boys' singles" in the tennis tournament at Halcyon Inn. The girls came home from the game in high feather, and all Huairarwee shone with reflected glory.

But it was with a very sober face that Carol returned from the Inn to luncheon. As soon as it was over she followed Evelyn to her tent. "Evelyn," she said, "you know I was sitting beside Mrs. Overton at the tournament to-day. She began to talk to me about Douglas. She said she understood that Mr. Lennox was n't going to keep him for a son any longer, and how sad it was he had turned out so badly!" Evelyn's eyes opened wide with astonishment. "I asked her what on earth she meant," Carol went on, "and I must have looked pretty indignant, for she seemed rather scared; but she said she had heard that Douglas's conduct lately had been a great disappointment to the Lennoxes. I asked her who had been spreading such an outrageous piece of scandal! And what report do you think is going the rounds about Douglas? That he has squandered hundreds and hundreds of dollars and that Mr. Lennox is very angry!"

"I never said such a thing! You need n't come accusing *me*!" Evelyn burst out defiantly.

She had turned white. "I never even met Mrs. Overton!"

"Of course you did n't say all that, Evelyn," said Carol. "But gossip generally ends several sizes larger than it began. I told Mrs. Overton it was the most shameful piece of nonsense I ever heard of, and that there was n't a finer fellow living than Douglas! And I made her tell me from whom she had heard the thing. She had heard it from Miss Ellicott. Then I hunted up Miss Ellicott and found that she got it from Natalie Harris, Adela Mears' friend at the Inn, you know; and of course each one had exaggerated the *last* report!"

Evelyn turned from white to crimson. "I—I didn't say anything that could do any harm! I only just mentioned his using up his money. And I'm not answerable to *you* anyway!"

"But you *are* answerable for starting a slander that may hurt Douglas's reputation! You've helped to put a black stain on his character, and for all we know it may injure his chances in life for years to come! Nobody knows where the mischief will end. Now then, how many people have you spoken to? Tell me, or I'll ask every girl in camp."

"Just Adela and Mildred, and—oh, Thekla was there too," murmured Evelyn, sullenly.

“They started talking about Douglas, and I just happened to speak of it.”

Carol stepped out on the tent veranda from which she saw a cluster of girls on the lawn. “Mildred!” she called. “Mildred! Find Thekla and Adela, please, and come here as quick as you can, all three of you!”

When the three appeared Evelyn turned upon Adela, angrily. “Why did you need to go and tell your friend that about Douglas?” she demanded. “I think you might have kept still! You’ve made a fine mess of it!”

Adela looked blank. “Why, did Natalie say anything?” she asked.

Carol repeated what she had learned. “Now,” she ended, “just see all the harm that’s been done! By to-morrow it will probably be all over the place that Douglas helped himself to those ‘hundreds of dollars’ out of Mr. Lennox’s pocket!”

“Oh, Carol, it won’t!” wailed Adela. “But I never dreamt Natalie would go and repeat! I told her in strict confidence, and she promised not to breathe a word!”

“Don’t you know that half the girls who promise *that* take the first opportunity to breathe three times as many words as you’ve told them!”

“But I only told her that Douglas used up the

money at school, and he would n't tell Mr. Lennox how."

"In the first place we don't know whether it was at school, or where it was," said Carol. "And in the second place Mr. Lennox has never asked him a word about it."

"I 'm sure I did n't mean any harm, Carol!" protested Adela.

"No, and the others did n't mean any harm either; but each of you added something out of your own brain, firmly convinced that you heard it from the last person."

"But it can't really injure Douglas, can it?" asked Mildred.

"Yes, it *can*. There's no telling where gossip will end; and if we don't stop it now, as like as not, when he's grown, out will come some story that when he was a boy he gambled and stole and I don't know what not!"

"What nonsense!" cried Evelyn, angrily. "It could n't spread like that!"

"Yes, it *could*! Now, Thekla and Mildred, have either of you spoken to anyone?"

"I have n't," answered Thekla.

"I was talking to Maud, and Sidney was there. Oh, dear! I never thought!" lamented Mildred.

"Very well, then go right off and tell them not to repeat a word of this wicked story! I

tried my best to-day to set things straight at the Inn, and I'm going there again this afternoon to tell them how it all started out of nothing!"

"Don't tell Jean I told, she'll never forgive me!" pleaded Adela.

"I should hate to tell Jean; it would trouble her fearfully," replied Carol. "But Mildred, warn Maud and Sidney, for if this goes any farther, Jean will have to know, and Douglas too."

"Oh, no! Carol—don't tell *him*!" implored Mildred and Adela. "We'll make it all right, indeed we will! But don't tell Douglas and Jean, for pity's sake!" And they hurried away to right the wrong as far as it was in their power.

While the penitents were trying to undo the mischief they had wrought, Jean and Stella were engaged in the kitchen of Rest-a-bit. The hero of the tennis tournament had been invited by two other young competitors to go off with them the next morning for a three days' camping-trip, and Jean had resolved to add to his provisions a batch of ginger cookies. Stella, foreseeing a total wreck of the cakes if Jean were left to her own devices, undertook the business herself. Jean, greatly relieved, cleared a corner of the table for herself, and

perching upon it took up the more congenial occupation of improving her friend's mind with a recitation from Browning.

I sprang to my stirrup, and Joris, and he;
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three!

But the good news was not destined to be brought from Ghent to Aix that day. Before Jean could declaim the third line, into the kitchen burst Frances, her black eyes snapping, and news very much the reverse of good at her tongue's end.

"Jean, I'm so mad at that old Evelyn and Adela and Mildred, I could slap them all round!"

"Mercy, Frisk, what's happened?" Jean slid down from the table.

"Why, Evelyn has been saying horrid things about Douglas, and that Simple Simon of an Adela went and told it to Natalie Harris, and it's all over the Inn that Douglas has been losing hundreds and hundreds of dollars and Mr. Lennox is furious!"

"Frances, what do you mean? Evelyn didn't go and make up a story like *that*!" Jean's voice was sharp with horror.

"No, but she said he'd used up all his money, and your father was angry; and she gossiped, and Adela gossiped, and now the

stupids at the Inn have got hold of it; and Carol says there 's no knowing where it will end!"

"It 's all a wicked, wicked lie!" cried Stella.

"Evelyn *dared* to go gossiping? It 's just like her!" Jean's hands were clenched in her indignation. "What do you mean by it 's being all over the Inn? Who found it out?"

"Carol!" replied Frances. "Thekla says she 's *blazing*!"

"I must find Carol right away!" cried Jean. She dashed out of the kitchen, the other two following. There, coming along the woody path, was Douglas, carrying his tournament prize—a fine racket, decorated with ribbons.

"Hello! Where are you girls running to?" he called.

"Maybe she 'll want to tell him," whispered Stella to Frances. "We 'd better go home." And they slipped off, while Jean went to meet the boy.

"We 've got to start at five o'clock to-morrow," said Douglas. "So I 'm going to spend the night with Fred Barclay. You 'll have to keep this for me and use it while I 'm gone. Why, what 's the matter, Jean? You look excited!"

"Douglas, won't you please, *please* write to Father to-night and tell him what you did with your money?"

“Did you tell him about it?” he asked quickly.

“Don’t be angry with me, Douglas, will you? I *had* to.” And then Jean told him how her cousin had overheard their conversation, and what she had said to Carol and Cecily. She saw the hot blood rush into his cheeks, and the gray eyes kindle under the contracted brows. “And Father heard us talking,” she said, “and he called me in and made me tell what the matter was. And won’t you write and tell him how you spent the money, and make it all right?”

“You mean he thinks I’ve done something wrong?”

“No, indeed! He said it would all come right, but I think it *worried* him a little.”

Jean saw the look of pain deepen in the boy’s face. “I hope he don’t think me underhanded, after all he’s done for me!” was his comment. “Anybody else know about it?” Jean nodded sadly.

“Who? Go ahead, Jean. Give us the whole of it! Don’t go keeping things back. I have a right to know.” Jean told him all that she had heard. If ever honest eyes showed anger and amazement, the boy’s did, as he stared at her, seeming hardly able to believe her words.

“You don’t mean,” he said slowly, “that any

of the girls would go telling such stories about me behind my back!"

"Oh, Douglas, I just *hated* to tell you, but you made me!"

"Oh *I* can stand it all right," he said, with a short, proud laugh. "But—I can't get over it, their going on like that!"

To think that well-bred girls could be capable of an act of slander was a painful shock to his sense of chivalry. "They're not all like you and Carol, are they, Jean?" he said. "Well, let 'em gab! It won't hurt *me*. *I*'ve done nothing to be ashamed of."

"I should say not!" exclaimed Jean. "Oh, that miserable Evelyn! I don't see why she had to come here, and spoil everything! I wish she wasn't my cousin. But, Douglas, *can't* you write and tell Father about it; and then we can say *he knows*, and everybody 'll see it's all right. Can't you?"

"Oh, yes! I'll write, if you want me to. But I'll have to tell him I can't explain—yet. Well, I'll have to get my kit together now," he added. "I told the fellows I'd be over to supper."

"Oh, Douglas, it's going to spoil all your camping-trip, and you were going to have such a beautiful time!"

"Don't worry, Jean. I'm all right!" With

an easy air of *nonchalance* he went off to collect his kit. Jean returned to her cookies and packed them into the guide-basket, a lump in her throat, and a sad ache at her heart.

"Now, don't worry," Douglas repeated, when he was ready to say good-by. "I 'm sure some day I 'll be able to prove to Father and Mother that I did the only right thing. I thought it over a good many times, and I don't see what else I could have done. I 'm sure they 'll understand."

"Of course they will! I know it!" said Jean confidently. "And they're so fond of you, Douglas! You don't know how fond of you they are!"

"You 'd better believe I 'm fond of *them*!"

"And you know *I* trust you, Douglas. I trust you as hard, as hard—Oh dear, I just can't say it out, but I trust you with all my might!" Jean was looking at him, with all her loyal soul speaking through her blue eyes, and she had taken possession of both his strong, brown hands, and was squeezing them tight in her earnestness. A proud, glad smile lightened up the boy's face, and the strong hands in their turn grasped the little slim ones with a grateful force that made the delicate fingers ache.

"You're a brick of a sister, Jean!" he said.

CHAPTER XV

ERIC VANISHES

THE next day Camp Hurricane was thrown into a state of turmoil which made its name appropriate. Eric Armstrong failed to appear at the Hamiltons' breakfast-table.

"He must have gone swimming," said his tent-mate, Jack. "He quit the premises before I was awake."

"He would n't have to quit very early to do that," remarked his sister Rose. But when nearly two hours had passed and Eric had not returned, both she and her mother grew anxious.

"He's probably gone fishing. He'll come back when he gets good and hungry," said Jack, philosophically.

"See if his fish-pole is gone," said his mother. An investigation of the fish-pole supply, however, showed that not one was missing.

"Maybe he went to breakfast at the Brooks'. They have muffins every day there, and *you* won't give us any, Muzzie," said Jack, looking reproachfully at his mother.

"I 'm going up there to give Carol that ring I got mended," said Court, who had returned from New York the night before, "and I 'll hunt him up."

The girl campers were afloat as he turned into Huairarwee Bay, and he met Carol in her canoe.

"I was just coming to see you," he said.

"And I was just going down to Hurricane," she returned. "I have a message for Eric from Mother. Shall I find him there as late as this?"

"No, he made an early start this morning. He was off before Jack was awake. We thought he might have dropped in to breakfast with you."

Carol looked troubled. "What a strange thing for him to do!" she exclaimed. "And he didn't come back to breakfast! And it's ten o'clock now! Oh, dear! I hope nothing's happened to him!"

"Don't worry about him, Carol. He knows how to take care of himself! I 'll look him up, though, and then you 'll feel easy. He's rather fond of tramping off by himself, is n't he?"

"I never knew him to be till this summer, but he's so freaky lately!" replied Carol. "Mercy! I hope he hasn't gone to the Wizard's Grotto! He declared again, the other day, that he meant to dive down some time and see if he could work his way up through the opening under water that Jack told us about. And he

may have been caught down there among the rocks!" She shuddered and the color left her face.

"Don't think of such a thing! He was only teasing you! And anyhow he wouldn't get stuck."

"But he might have struck his head against a rock in diving!"

"No, no; he's too good a diver to hurt himself," Court assured her. "I'll go there myself, though, and dive down and explore the opening thoroughly, and then you'll feel satisfied."

Away he went up the lake at racing speed, and there was nothing for Carol to do but bear as patiently as she could the agony of waiting—her eyes turning every other minute in the direction from which Court's canoe must come.

"There he is! There he is!" called Jean at last. "He's waving his handkerchief to show you it's good news!"

A blessed relief it was to see that flourished signal, and to hear Court shout, "It's all right!"

When he had reached the dock they talked the mystery over.

"Maybe he's homesick and gone back to Wyndgarth," Court suggested.

"It's not a bit like him to be homesick," said Carol. "But I know what he may have

done. He may have gone back to the city to join Alan or Howard and try to get some work. He 's been crazy to work ever since he found Howard and Alan and I were all taking positions. And he was dreadfully cut up because Father told him he was too young and must finish school first. I 'm sure that 's what makes him so queer and moody lately. Poor old boy! I believe he takes the family troubles harder than anyone knows."

"That 's probably what 's the matter with him," said Court. "He may have gone to look for work at one of the camps, the way Douglas did last year. Better let him take a job if he wants one. I 'll go home and see if he 's taken his clothes. If he has, we 'll know there 's been no accident, anyway."

Carol could not rest in suspense, so he took her down with him in his canoe to Hurricane. Mrs. Hamilton and Rose joined them in examining the boys' tent; but Carol's heart sank once more, for Eric's suit-case was still there. His overcoat was hanging on a peg; his trunk was locked and the key gone. But there was one hopeful sign: his tennis shoes and his boots were missing.

"His canvas camping-bag!" Carol suddenly exclaimed. "Perhaps he 's taken that!" A thorough search showed that the bag had disappeared. Court meanwhile had forced open

the trunk, and she found that its contents were in a tumbled condition, and that his wardrobe presented a somewhat limited appearance. "Mother would never have sent him up with so few things," said she. "He's certainly taken some of them with him."

"Then surely, Carol, he has gone home," said Mrs. Hamilton.

"Yes," the girl agreed, "unless—there's just one other thing I've thought of that he might have done—he might have started for Michigan."

"For Michigan!" echoed the others.

"Yes, he has a school friend out there—Frank Anderson. He had a letter from him just before he came here, inviting him to visit him at Cold Harbor on Lake Superior. Of course Eric was wild to go, but such an expensive trip was out of the question. Then he won a ten dollar prize getting subscriptions for a magazine, and he had a fine scheme for using that to help pay his way, and then finding work out there. He talked at a great rate about the West being the place for a fellow to make money, and he was quite broken-hearted that Mother wouldn't hear of it. He must have taken that ten dollars now. But he's always been such an obedient boy! And I don't see how he *could* dash off like this, when you've all

been so lovely to him! Still, with the Western craze in his brain—”

“We all get the tramping fever some time or other,” said Court. “I had it when I was twelve. I got eight miles away, but I decided there was no place like home when it came to supper time. It may work like that with Eric. We’ll expect him in about six P. M. I’ll tell you what I’ll do, Carol. I’ll go over to the Junction now to ask if he’s been seen at the station. And if we don’t find him before night I’ll go to New York by the midnight train.”

“Oh, Court, how good of you to take so much trouble! But don’t go out to Wyndgarth. Go and see Howard and Alan first. Father and Mother mustn’t know, if you find he’s run away! Father is so weak from his illness, and it would just kill Mother!”

“If Eric has n’t gone home, and we don’t get any other clue, I’ll go out to Michigan, myself, and head him off,” said Court. “And we’ll have him back again before your Mother hears a word about it.”

“Court, I don’t know how to thank you!” exclaimed Carol.

“Don’t try. I’m only too glad of a chance to see Lake Superior, and Howard and Alan can’t go, you know, without risking their positions. Ten to one, though, he’s only gone to New York.”

Only to New York! To that hope Carol clung all through that anxious day, while fruitless inquiries were made in every direction. Night came at last, but no Eric, and so Court started for New York.

The next morning a telegram was received saying that Eric had not been seen in the city, and that Court would start that evening for Cold Harbor.

The day after Court's departure Douglas came home from his camping trip. He had just set down his guide-basket on the porch at Rest-a-bit, when up came Jean on the run and breathless. Without pausing for a greeting she burst out with the startling news, "Eric's run away!"

"Eric! Run away! Thunder! What do you mean?" Jean told how the boy had disappeared and how Court had set off in pursuit.

"Run away!" Douglas repeated. "Great Scott! And they think he's gone to Michigan! And he never let on where he was going? Poor Carol, I suppose she's awfully knocked up!"

"She's as brave as ten lions!" said Jean. "She says you couldn't hurt an Armstrong if you tried, and that he'll turn up safe and sound in the end. You'd never dream she was worrying, but she *is*. She's just keyed up, and she looks as if she were listening for something all the time. And she can't sit still and rest one

moment. Is n't it dreadful, when they 've had such heaps of trouble already!"

"Michigan," said Douglas, musingly. There was a thoughtful wrinkle in his forehead, and he fell to whistling softly—a sure sign that he was deep in cogitation.

"What 's the matter? What are you brown-studying about?" asked Jean. "Don't you think he 's probably gone out there?"

"No, I *don't*," he answered. "I 'll bet you anything you like he 's gone to New Orleans."

"New Orleans!" cried Jean.

"Yes, there 's a fellow from school comes from there—Stanton Rossiter. He 's a kind of popular hero with the kids. Eric 's regularly *gone* on him."

"But why is Eric any more likely to have gone to see him than to see Frank Anderson who invited him?" asked Jean.

"Well, it 's just what he would do if he 's wanting to make money," answered Douglas. "Anyhow, I think that 's where he 's gone. I tell you what—if I was n't cleaned out of cash, all but five dollars, I 'd start for New Orleans myself. I could borrow, though! I 'll ask Dr. Hamilton to lend me some."

"Oh, splendid!" cried Jean. "Douglas, you go right straight off to New Orleans. I 'll give you all my money, too. I 've saved up my al-

lowance for nearly three months, so that I could use it for Carol. I 've forty dollars."

"Good for you! It 'll probably take about a hundred and fifty—counting coming back with Eric, but I 'll borrow the rest from the Doctor. I hate to take yours, but I guess I 'll have to. I 'll get a job when I come home and pay you both back."

"No, you won't!" declared Jean. "Father 'll pay for everything, of course. And I tell you I mean my money for Carol, anyway. It 's L. S. R. money—don't you see?"

"And I 'm the boss of the L. S. R., so it 's up to me to hustle!" said Douglas.

"Can't you start right off now?" asked Jean. "Maybe you 'd catch him on the way."

"Well, would you mind if I had some dinner, first?"

Jean laughed. "You poor boy! I didn't mean to drive you away starving. Maggie! Maggie!" she called into the kitchen. "Mr. Douglas must have his dinner as quick as you can get it. He has to start for New Orleans this afternoon."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea to look at a time table," suggested Douglas. Accordingly they hunted one up and studied the trains.

"Five fifteen. That 's the first," said the boy. "And maybe I can get a morning train

South. You see Eric 'll have to work his way out, and hook rides, and it 'll take him a good long while to get there. If I can start off quick, there 's a fighting chance I might run across him pretty near home. If I get all the way to New Orleans, I 'll just have to hunt up the Rossiters and hang around till he shows up."

"Oh, Douglas, I 'm so excited! It 's so sort of romantic! Just think of your starting off for New Orleans at a minute's notice!"

"Don't you wish you were going, too?"

"Don't I, just! Oh, I wish girls could dash off whenever they wanted to, like boys!"

"Don't let Carol onto it till I 've gone," said Douglas. "Let me get away without any fuss!"

"But she 'll want to say goodby to you!"

"Oh, she won't mind! And she might get an idea I ought n't to bolt off like this. Don't tell anyone till I 'm off."

"All right, I 'll keep dark. Oh, Douglas, it 's more exciting than ever—going off secretly! I know just how Veronica felt when she had to get the Major out of the secret room! Oh, that reminds me—the signet ring 's gone again!"

"Hello! Did Court have a hole in his pocket?" asked Douglas.

"I hope not! He brought it back from the jeweler's all safe, Jack says, but then the fright

came about Eric, and he forgot to give it to us. And now he 's carried it away again!"

"It 'll be dropped into Lake Superior next," Douglas predicted. "By the way, Jean, are they still gossiping about that two hundred, up at the Inn?"

"Oh, Douglas, how stupid of me not to tell you! No, indeed! Everybody knows now that Father was n't a bit angry and that it was all Ev's fault for talking nonsense!"

"Poor Ev! I hope they 're not all down on her, now!" said Douglas. "Well, I must pack my suit-case."

"I 'll drive you to the station," said Jean.

"Will you? That 's jolly!"

While Douglas was having his dinner Jean ran back to Huairarwee to get her money. When he was ready to leave she went with him to the stable and helped him harness Hiawatha to the dog-cart.

She took her place in the driver's seat with Douglas at her side, and away they went, laughing as they heard Cecily's voice in the distance, calling: "Jean! Jean! Where are you? We're going out on the lake!"

Jean flicked Hiawatha with the whip, and by the time that Cecily had arrived at Rest-a-bit, looking for her, the trap was far down the road. They stopped at Camp Hurricane, where Dr. Hamilton supplied the boy generously with

funds. Then they drove on to the Junction, ten miles away, and there was just time for Douglas to buy his ticket before they heard the whistle.

“Train ’s coming! Good-by, Jean. Take care of yourself. You ’re a brick, the way you help to make things spin along!”

“Good-by, Douglas! Good luck! I ’m sure you ’ll find him!” A hasty handshake; Douglas dashed off to board his train; and Jean turned Hiawatha back on the homeward road.

“Dear old Hiawatha! If you had n’t trotted so beautifully fast we would n’t have been in time,” said Jean. “We ’ll have to make you a member of the League. You ’ve been working for Carol this afternoon, too,—do you know that? You ’re nodding your head just as if you were saying, ‘Of course I do!’ I ’m going to propose your name at the next meeting of the League. You ’ll be a very *active* member!”

The sun was low when she reached the road that led through the woods to Camp Huair-arwee. Jean looked at her watch. “Goody me, it ’s nearly seven! They must be getting worried about me.” Turning into the forest road she saw coming toward her a girl and a dog.

“Jean, is that you at last?” called a clear voice, and she recognized Carol with Roderick

Dhu. "Queenie Lennox, you wild, delirious creature!"

Jean pulled up to take her in.

"The coolness of your majesty going off to drive, without a word to anybody! But what have you done with Douglas? Didn't he go with you?"

"Douglas is on his way to New Orleans!" announced Jean.

"What!" gasped Carol, and she dropped into the seat like one thunder-struck. Jean laughed in high glee.

"He's gone after Eric! He's sure he'll find him in New Orleans."

"New Orleans! What do you mean? Has he a clue?"

Jean told her of Douglas's theory. "Stanton Rossiter!" Carol exclaimed. "I didn't know Eric had anything to do with *him*. He's so much older. He's in the class with Alan."

"Douglas says they were thick with each other last Spring," explained Jean.

"And Douglas has gone after him—shot off without a word!" said Carol. "He knew I'd stop him. He ought not to have done it, the dear old boy! I'd have told him to wait till we could hear from Court. But bless his heart, I'm precious glad I didn't know! I can't think of anything but saving that small brother of mine!"

"Well, I just *know* Douglas will find him!" said Jean. "I feel it all through me!"

"But his expenses!" said Carol, suddenly.

"He has a hundred and fifty dollars," answered Jean. "I gave him some, and Dr. Hamilton gave him the rest. And when Father comes home he can send him more if he needs it."

"I'll pay you all back again as soon as I can earn enough," declared Carol.

"Not much!" Jean contradicted; but Carol insisted, "I *will*. Douglas is going out to find my brother, and you're giving your money to help, and I *will* pay it back!"

"We'll see what Daddy says to that," remarked Jean. Carol's arm went round her friend's neck, and she kissed her impulsively.

"Little Sister, I hate to think of all the bother these Armstrongs are giving," she said. "But I tell you it's worth while going through troubles, just to learn what true friends one has! I'd do very wrong to lose heart now, with two such knights as Court and Douglas going out to find my poor little brother!"

CHAPTER XVI

VALIANT CHAMPIONS

NOW was the time for the girls of the Order to make good use of sword and shield, and, loving and loyal, to rally around their Alruna in her new trouble. And, with one exception, so they did, their eager sympathy bringing her comfort through those days of anxious waiting for news. The exception was Evelyn. Since the day when the scandal had been brought home to her, she had held aloof, haughty and sullen. Her cousin she avoided altogether, and Jean dared not break the ice for fear that her own hot temper would master her once more.

"You 'd think Evelyn was the injured person instead of Douglas!" Jean exclaimed one day. "She acts as if she thought *we* ought to apologize to *her*!"

"Mother thinks she 's *really* sorry, but she 's too proud to own it," said Cecily.

"I don't believe she is at all!" declared Jean. "If she was, she 'd at least be decent enough to tell Carol she was sorry about Eric. But she has n't said one single word to show she cares

a snap for all the trouble Carol's in. And Carol's just as nice and kind to her as if nothing had ever gone wrong. She says she does n't blame the poor girl a bit for not loving her after the heart-to-heart talk they had about Douglas! But Evelyn must know she deserved all she got and more too! Well, she's a problem! I wish I could think what awful thing I've done at some time or other to make her dislike me so!"

"I know what it is," said Hilda.

"You do!" cried Jean. "Well, for pity's sake tell me!"

"You beat her in Latin and English."

"Well, and *she* beat *me* all to smithereens in geometry. But, Hilda, child, she would n't take a dislike to me just because I came out ahead in something! No, I must have offended her—but for the life of me I can't think when!"

"I don't think she dislikes you, Jean, except in her 'fits.' But I think she's jealous of you."

"What!"

"Yes, jealous of you. Don't you see,—she wanted to come out ahead in every single thing. You told me yourself she was always at the head of her class at that school she went to before she came to Hazelhurst. But now she has to take the second place because *you*, ma'am, get in the way! It's just a case of jealousy."

"Jealous—of—*me*! Hilda, I don't believe

it. She 's cranky, and she can be mean, but she is n't a crazy goose! It would be too silly of her!"

"I know I 'm right," Hilda insisted. "I guessed it at Carol's house party, and then after the prize story contest and the June exams I was perfectly positive."

"She had a fit of hardly speaking to me at Commencement," said Jean, thoughtfully. "And she was huffy about the prize story, I know. But then her feelings get hurt so easily, just like mine. But I never dreamt she was *jealous*. I thought she was just cross. Cece, do you think Hilda 's right?"

"I 'm afraid she is," Cecily admitted slowly.

"Oh, dear! And we 're cousins, too!" cried Jean. "That makes it worse!"

"I was n't going to tell you, Jean," said Hilda, repentant at having distressed her friend. "But you asked me, and you were so afraid you 'd offended her, that I thought I 'd better tell you the plain truth."

Jean's face was clouded with unhappiness. "Oh, girls!" she sighed. "Is n't it dreadful to have such things happen in the Silver Sword!"

One day after another passed, bringing no change in Evelyn's attitude of proud sullenness, and no word from the runaway. Carol went about her work, bright and cheery as ever, so far as her pupils could see, but her courage

was heavily taxed. An added weight was laid on her brave heart by the letter which came from her brother Howard, in answer to her pleading to know the truth about their father's health. It told her that he would never be well enough to take up a business life again, and confessed that he had lately been growing worse. It was no wonder that when evening came and she led the Huairarwee glee club in its choruses, Carol's voice more than once trembled and nearly failed her as she sang.

"Carol, here 's news from Eric at last!" It was nearly a week since the runaway had disappeared, and now Jean burst into Carol's tent flourishing a letter and a postal card. With a cry of joy Carol seized them and recognized Court's handwriting on the envelop, and Eric's down-hill scrawl on the card.

"DEAR SISTER," she read. "I 'm going out West to get work. Big chance for me. Don't let anybody start to hunt me up, for I won't come home till I 've made some money. It 's not square for H. and A. and you, all to be working, and me doing nothing. I 'll write Mother when I 'm settled. Tell her I 'm all right, and not to worry.

"Your aff. brother,

"E. L. ARMSTRONG."

Then it was out West that Eric had gone; and it was not mere boyish wildness, but the

manly impulse to help his family that had caused him to spread his wings and take French leave of his kind hosts. Carol kissed the smudgy card, read it a second time, and eagerly looked at the postmark. "Chicago!" she exclaimed. "And it's dated Wednesday! Then Court's on the right track after all. Eric has stopped in Chicago on his way out to Cold Harbor! Oh, Jean, I'm so thankful! I almost feel as if we had him back already!"

"And you really *will* have him back again in just a few days now!" cried Jean, her face as bright as her friend's. "I read the card the minute I saw it—I was so crazy to hear!"

"But poor Douglas!" said Carol. "He's on the wrong track! Gone all the way down to New Orleans for nothing—poor boy!"

"He's tried his best to find Eric anyway," said Jean.

"And I shall be just as grateful to him all my life!" declared Carol, warmly. "'A big chance!' What can Eric have heard of? Frank must have told him about some scheme." She took up Court's letter. "Jean, did you see this?" She displayed the back of the envelop, on which was a flaring red seal stamped *V. C.*

"Yes, I saw that," answered Jean, "and it shows he has the ring safe."

Court's letter was posted from Buffalo:

“DEAR CAROL: The seal on my envelop will show the S. S. that its property has not gone to the pawn-broker’s. Instead, it is traveling out to Lake Superior on my watch chain. I won’t promise to give it back again. I ’m getting too much attached to it—and it ’s certainly *attached to me!* I ’ve always felt that it belonged by rights to me, anyhow, having my initials on it. V. C. stands for Van Courtlandt as well as for Veritas and Caritas. The letters are prophetic, too. They stand for Voluminous Correspondence, and signify that you will be kept duly informed of all that ’s doing out Michigan way. They also stand for Vigorous Chase, and Very-sure Capture. Eric is being chased at the rate of forty miles an hour, and I sure will catch him before long!

“I get to Marquette Friday night, and have to spend the night there and take a branch line in the morning for Cold Harbor. Maybe I ’ll take a short run out to Baraga County to have a look at your property there before I come back.”

“Your property!” Jean repeated.

“My father owns about five hundred acres in Baraga County, Michigan. But it ’s good-for-nothing land, and he ’s going to sell it for a song.” And Carol continued reading:

“Good-by, and it will be ‘How-d’ye-do?’ over the wires from Eric before you know it. No need to tell you to keep up your pluck, for I know you ’re doing that anyhow.

“Your Vigilance Committee of One,

“V. C. HAMILTON.”

The letter which Carol despatched in reply that day began:

“DEAR COURT: V. C. stands for *Via Chicago*, too, and I think you are on the right track.”

She told him of Eric's postal and of Douglas's hasty flight southward, and reminded him that the famous initials signified also *Valiant Champions*. With two such valiant champions as himself and Douglas, Eric must surely be brought back before many days.

If Carol could only have been blessed with second sight and have peeped into the office of the hotel in Marquette on Friday night, she would have seen a few travelers enjoying their newspapers as they lounged in the chairs before the windows, and she would have observed a tall young fellow enter and follow their example. Court found a vacant chair near two men who were engaged in earnest conversation. Suddenly he heard the words “Baraga County,” and then the name of “Armstrong.” If the speaker had turned his head at that instant he would have found a pair of keen eyes fixed upon him and noticed that the wide-awake looking young man three chairs away was an interested listener. The keen eyes were quickly lowered to the paper once more, but Court's ears were pricked up and ready to take in the rest of the conversation.

In a new section of Baraga County, the man said, a rich vein of the finest iron ore had recently been discovered. It ran through the property of a number of landholders whose names he repeated—among them that of Armstrong. So, then, the barren bit of soil held a precious secret deep down in its heart! But the speculators who were interested in it of course did not wish to share that secret with the owners. To buy up at the lowest possible figure the whole of the tract, with its promise of wealth—this was their plan. Court learned that they had offered Mr. Armstrong a small sum for his part of the land, and he was on the point of selling it, little dreaming of its true value.

Never was a man more absorbed in the politics of the day than was Court, to all appearances, while the scheme was being unfolded in his hearing; but instead of columns of printed matter he saw a vision of a sick and ruined man lifted suddenly out of despair, and of a brave girl, who was struggling to earn her daily bread, restored as by magic to comfort once more.

Court rose with an air of unconcern, and walked leisurely out of the hotel. Once in the street he set off briskly for the nearest telegraph office to send a warning to the Armstrong home. A few minutes later the words went flashing eastward over the wires: "Don't sell

Baraga property. Wait for letter." The letter was written that night. It told the secret of the rich vein of iron, and urged Mr. Armstrong to hold his land for a high price. When he had mailed the letter Court smiled as he looked at the signet ring on his watch chain. He had played his part well as a member of the League!

It was a pity that Jean could not have had a glimpse of the *second* valiant champion, when, just arrived in New Orleans, he stood in the St. Charles Hotel, entering himself in the register. Having written his name, Douglas happened to glance at the opposite page. Instantly his face grew as eager as Court's had done when he learned of the iron ore, for at the head of the page he read: "D. H. Rossiter, Cincinnati." A Rossiter here in the hotel! Surely, then, he must be kinsman to Stanton,—for the name was none too common! The boy inquired, found that the traveler from Ohio was in, and was soon in conversation with him. But D. H. Rossiter's blank expression when *Stanton* was spoken of proved Douglas not to be the prime favorite of fortune that he had begun to suppose. No: the man knew only of a Dr. Rossiter, a distant connection, who might or might not have a son. Better try the doctor, anyway, he advised; so Douglas sought out the address and hastened to the physician's resi-

dence. Dr. Rossiter *did* possess a son, but unfortunately the boy was a *Charlie*. Yet the youthful detective was on the right track after all. The doctor directed him to the home of a *Judge Rossiter*, and Stanton, he said, was the name of the judge's son.

Through the tropic heat Douglas pushed his quest to the door of a Spanish-looking house near Tulane University. Shades down; no answer to his repeated ring; family clearly out of town! Dame Fortune was evidently a tease! The boy's next move was to hurry to the judge's business address, only to find the office just closing for the night. "The judge? Called out to Nevada two days ago," said the clerk. The rest of the family? Away for the summer; he did not know where. But wait! There was the judge's *brother*, the clerk remembered. He had a plantation out near Pickettsville. Why not go there for particulars? It was but a two hours' trip.

That evening Douglas watched the Rossiter house in vain for the possible appearance of Eric. Next morning he was on the railroad again, speeding toward the plantation.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BUBBLE BURSTS

THE train was halting at a town not far from Pickettsville, and Douglas was wondering whether the equator itself could be much hotter than this sun-baked southern station. Presently he heard a childish voice announcing, "I want to sit by a window and look out!"

He turned and saw standing in the aisle a small golden-haired girl, about eight years old, and a stout colored woman.

"Here, little girl, you take my seat," said Douglas. He stepped out and let the diminutive passenger ensconce herself in his place by the window.

"Thank you, sah!" said the ebon-faced mammy. "Say, 'Thank you' to the young gentleman, honey chile." The little girl dimpled and murmured something too softly to be understood.

"Don't you want to sit next to her?" Douglas asked the woman.

"No, sah, thank you, sah! I 's gwine git out dis minute. Her ma 's sick and dey can't no-

body nuss her like me. De conductor gwine take care o' my chile. By-by, honey! Now you be real good!"

The woman left the train, and the little girl proceeded to study her neighbor from under her long lashes.

"You 're traveling all by yourself, aren't you?" said Douglas.

She nodded solemnly; then, as if feeling that one good turn deserved another, she opened a package of candy that she had been hugging. "Take some," she commanded.

"Thank you—um! That 's great!" Douglas helped himself to a sticky caramel. Then he brought out an orange from his paper luncheon-bag. "Do you like to suck oranges?" he inquired. She nodded again. He cut a hole in the golden fruit, stuffed in one of her candies, and handed the offering to the young lady. "Where do you live?" he asked.

"New Orleans," she answered. "But Green Springs is my summer home."

"And where are you going, all alone?"

"To visit Uncle John and Aunt Rebecca. Where are *you* going?"

"To Pickettsville."

"That 's where *I* 'm going, too!" she cried. "To meet Uncle John and go to his plantation, 'cause Mother 's sick, and Father 's gone away to find Stan."

"Stan!" Douglas repeated. "Is he your brother?"

She nodded. "He 's run away," she said impressively.

"Great Cæsar! Look here! Is your name Rossiter?"

"Yes," she answered. "My name 's Anne Rossiter. How did you know?"

"Because I know your brother! We 're at the same school."

"Way up North?" asked Anne; then, won to confidence, she added, "He 's run away and we can't find him anywhere. Did *you* see him?"

"No, but I came out here to look him up. I was at your home yesterday and found you all gone. I'm looking for a boy that 's run away, too. Did you ever hear of Eric Armstrong?" Anne shook her head.

"Well, he knows Stan," said Douglas. "Maybe they 've run away together!" She opened her blue eyes wide. "I 'm going to find Eric," he went on, "and maybe I 'll find Stan, too. Would n't that be nice?"

Anne gave a bounce of delight. "O-oh! Do hurry up and find him quick! Then Mother 'll get well. She 's sick because he ran away."

"Well, I 'll hurry all I can. Look here, Anne, did you ever see a man named Mr. Renshaw?"

He expected a shake of the golden head, but

to his astonishment she answered promptly, "I don't like him."

"Hello! Now we're getting onto it!" cried Douglas. "What's the matter with him? Why don't you like him?"

"'Cause he pulled my curls."

"Don't you like to have your curls pulled?"

"No," Anne replied emphatically, drawing away from him.

"All right, I won't pull them. Let's see. Renshaw lives out in San Antonio, does n't he? Well, I shouldn't wonder if your brother's gone out to stay with him. *He* likes him, if you don't. I guess that's where Stan's gone and Eric, too. I'll have to go out there and hunt 'em both up."

"Then you make Stan come right home, because he was naughty to run away," she charged him, and he promised to do his best.

They found Anne's uncle waiting for her at Pickettsville, and a very much surprised uncle he was to see her coming toward him, towing by the hand a tall lad whose face was unknown to him.

"Uncle John, this is Douglas Gordon!" she cried, "and he says Stan's gone to see Mr. Renshaw that pulled my hair! And he's going to bring him back!"

"What's this? Do you think you know

where my nephew is?" asked Mr. John Rossiter.

"Well, sir, I think I may be on the right track," answered Douglas. He explained his errand, and heard in return how Stanton Rossiter had disappeared from his home two weeks before, how the detectives had so far obtained no knowledge of him, and how his father had gone to Nevada, following a new clue.

"I think he's gone out to San Antonio to join Renshaw," began Douglas.

"Tom Renshaw! That good-for-nothing inventor?" the uncle exclaimed.

"Yes, Stan thinks a lot of him. And I know he said that when he got through school he meant to go into partnership with him."

"The young idiot! Means to be an inventor too, eh?"

"Well, he's awfully interested in the separator."

"What kind of a separator? Milk and cream?"

"No, it's a machine to separate gold from the sand. Renshaw was going to try it out in Arizona, and told Stan there was a lot of money in it."

"And he got Stan to invest in it, I suppose!" said Mr. Rossiter grimly. Douglas said nothing, but looked down.

"Oh, I see. You don't want to tell on him. All right; but I hope he has n't got *you* to put any money into this thing, young man."

"No, I have n't put in a cent," Douglas answered frankly.

"How about this young Armstrong you're after? Has he been investing in the separator? Separate a fool from his money, that's all it's good for!"

Again Douglas was silent, but he smiled meaningly. Mr. Rossiter saw that the lad felt in honor bound not to betray all he knew. "Young man," he said, "you're a sharp one. I wish my nephew had a little of your sense. Well, you're on the right track, I reckon."

Douglas dined at the plantation and then returned to New Orleans. That night he was journeying to Texas, and the following day he found himself in San Antonio. His first step was to look up the address of Thomas Renshaw, of separator fame. Studying a directory, he discovered, not a *Thomas* but a *Joseph* Renshaw, and made his way to the modest little house bearing the given number. And now a second time Dame Fortune gave proof that she was favoring Douglas in his search, for the old man who received him exclaimed:

"Well, how many more of you young fellows are coming here to join Tom?" It turned out that the inventor was this old man's son, but

there was nothing in the forlorn appearance of the house or of the aged gentleman himself to suggest that the separator had as yet brought a single grain of gold out of the sands.

Tom was not at home. How about Stanton Rossiter? Was he staying there? Yes, Stanton was upstairs. Mr. Renshaw called him, and down to the dingy parlor came a disillusionized young fortune-seeker, who greeted his school-fellow with a start and a stare. "What are you doing out here, Gordon?"

What Gordon was doing was quickly explained.

"Well, you've struck it right. Eric's coming out here," admitted Stanton Rossiter, and he looked glumly at his boots. It was anything but agreeable to have to own that he had been gulled; yet gulled he had been, and there was nothing for it now but to confess the truth. "Look here," he said, "that separator business has *busted*! Tom Renshaw sold out and quit, and I'm broke!"

Douglas understood. The winter before, Stanton had found a bluff and dashing hero to admire, and Renshaw was the man. Eagerly the boy had listened to the scheme of the separator which was to bring in millions to all who chose to put their money into the enterprise. Hearing that the stock was selling at only twenty-five cents a share, he had invested his

whole allowance in it and so had become a stockholder in the Renshaw Separator and Mining Company. At school Eric had heard his idol, Stanton Rossiter, telling how he was on the road to wealth. Accordingly Eric had taken all his money, and a large amount borrowed from other boys, and had bought a great quantity of shares for himself, indulging in the expectation of becoming a millionaire. This much Douglas had heard from Eric himself, and Stanton now told him the rest of the story.

Two weeks ago, young Rossiter, tired of home, had resolved to join Renshaw in San Antonio and go with him to Arizona to watch the work of the separator. So off to Texas he had dashed, only to spend a season of disenchantment at the inventor's home. At the end of that time Renshaw had sold out his whole plant for one hundred dollars. To make a long story short, the invention had turned out a failure!

But there was another chapter to the tale. Eric had been pestering his friend with letters, begging to know when the stock would begin to pay, and before starting for San Antonio, Stanton had written to him telling him of his intended journey, and urging him to join him. He handed Douglas a note in which Eric had announced his resolve to throw in his lot with

Stanton and Renshaw and restore the lost fortunes of the Armstrongs.

It was four days later that a freight train came rumbling into the yards of the San Antonio station, and off from one of the cars slipped as touselled a specimen of Young America as ever hooked a ride on a railroad. His boyish face was round by nature, but now it looked pinched and drawn, and where it was not black with cinders it was pale with weariness and hunger. He might have just emerged from a foot-ball scrimmage, to judge from the bristling aspect of his hair, and he was pathetically in need of a clean collar. But he shouldered his canvas bag with determination, as he made his way through the freight yard and out into the street. Whew, it was hot! He rubbed his wet forehead with his grimy sleeve. His head was aching as though it would burst, and his throat seemed to be on fire. He stopped at a drinking-fountain and drained cupful after cupful. Then he took from his pocket a crumpled letter, showed a passer-by the address at the head of it, and asked the direction. Supplied with information he set bravely out to find Stanton Rossiter.

Eric Armstrong had come safely through a score of adventures, and now only a mile or so more lay between him and his hero, and the chance to make a fortune. Yet he could not

resist halting to gaze longingly through the window of a restaurant. Hunger was gnawing him; the sun was slowly roasting him; how cool it looked in the shady room, with its electric fans and palms, and how tempting the pyramids of fruit on the counter! But Eric had used up his last cent, and he could feast only with his eyes.

Suddenly a hand fell on his shoulder. He jumped and turned,—but it was not a policeman that had arrested the vagrant. Instead, he looked up into the face of Douglas Gordon.

“Well, kiddie, I ’ve run you down at last!” said Douglas.

Poor Eric stared at him as wildly as if he were waking out of a nightmare. “How—how did you get here?” he stammered.

“By the Sunset Route. Thought you ’d like to have me meet you at the station,” answered Douglas, laughing at the amazed countenance before him. “I ’ve been hanging around all the morning, waiting for you. Must have missed you in the crowd. What train did you come on?”

“Freight,” replied the adventurer. “But,—how did you find out?”

“Did n’t you know I was a private detective agency?” asked Douglas.

“They sent you out after me!” muttered the runaway.



BUT FROM ONE OF THE CARS SLIPPED AS TOUSLED A SPECIMEN OF YOUNG
AMERICA AS EVER HOOKED A RIDE ON A RAILROAD.



"No, they did n't. But I was n't going to let your poor sister worry herself sick over you. She 's had enough to bother her! Come along to the hotel and get a scrub and some dinner."

"I 've got to meet a fellow," Eric objected.

"Rossiter? I 've seen him. He 'll be along pretty soon. But you 'd better get something to fatten you up before you talk business. What 's the matter with you, old chappie? You don't look as husky as you used to."

"I 'm first rate," said Eric, pluckily, but the longings of his inner man for a good square meal conquered even the spirit of independence; and Douglas having hailed a car, he boarded it without demur.

The other passengers looked curiously at the shock-headed young scare-crow sitting beside the well-dressed boy, and the scare-crow himself was at first moodily silent.

"Came by freight,—eh? Well, you look it!" jeered Douglas, and he joked with the adventurer over his personal appearance, until by the time the hotel was reached Eric's good humor was restored. A refreshing bath was followed by a dinner that made up for past privations.

"Have some hot tamales? They 're great for this sort of weather," said Douglas, as they studied the *menu*.

"Not on your life!" burst out the traveler. "That 's all I 've had for three days, and it 's

nothing but red pepper and corn husks! I've got a sore throat from the stuff now!" But Eric was too busy for conversation, till he had wound up the feast with two helps of ice-cream.

"Here comes Rossiter, now!" said Douglas, as the boy laid down his spoon. Eric looked and saw his friend entering the dining-room.

"Hello, Armstrong! How you wuz?" said Stan, coming up to the table with a fine assumption of easy gaiety.

"Oh, I'm in great shape!" Eric answered, shaking hands.

"Well, the *separator* is n't," blurted out his hero. "The whole concern 's bust up."

Eric stared. His jaw dropped. "Bust up!" he repeated. "Why, you wrote it was all right!"

"Well, I got fooled," replied Stan, grimly. "Renshaw sold out for a hundred dollars." Eric looked ill. The color which the dinner had brought back faded from his cheeks again. He continued to stare at Stanton, but he appeared stunned.

"Poor old chappie, it's rough on you!" exclaimed Douglas, laying a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "But you're seeing Texas anyhow."

"Hang Texas!" muttered Eric. Suddenly down came his foot with a stamp on the floor, and simultaneously bang went his clenched fist

on the table. "I 've made a big donkey of myself!" he groaned. "Hang it all! Gordon,"—he looked at Douglas despairingly,—"I can't pay you back a cent!"

"Don't worry about that. I'm not starying," said Douglas lightly.

"You 're a brick—the way you stand by a fellow!" began Eric.

"Cut that out, kiddie," Douglas remonstrated. And indeed Eric could say no more just then, for he felt a sudden lump in his throat.

"Well, there 's only one thing for you to do, old chap," said Douglas. "Turn round and go home again, and tell the whole thing to your father, like a man."

"That 's what *I* 'm going to do," put in Stanton.

The lump in Eric's throat would not subside, and he was winking violently; but he contrived to answer, "Well,—I guess I will."

Far away in Halcyon, Carol was finding it hard to keep up her resolute cheerfulness as that day drew to its close.

"What *shall* I write to my poor little mother?" she said to Jean. "Here 's another letter begging to know how Eric is. She 's dreadfully troubled because she hears nothing from him, and of course ever since he ran away I've not been able to say a word about him.

She 's sure that he 's ill and we 're hiding it from her. Poor darling! I can't keep it from her much longer!"

Despondently the girl began to write her home letter, but suddenly she dropped her pen, sprang to her feet, and flew from her tent out to the lawn. She had heard a cry from Cecily: "Here comes a boy with a telegram!"

Carol snatched the yellow envelop from the boy. It was addressed to her. She tore it open with trembling fingers and read the blessed words:

"Eric found. All well. Douglas Gordon."

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE STORM

“SHIVER my timbers, how we’re rocking!” ejaculated Skipper Frances of the *Dragon-Fly*, who, tucked up at ease in the center of the tossing canoe, was energetically singing out her orders to the able seamen Cecily and Jean, as they toiled hard at the paddles.

“It’s shiver our timbers in earnest! Look at those white-caps!” cried Jean in the bow.

“It’s a regular squall!”

“We’ll have to swim for it before we’re through!” said Cecily.

Yesterday, when not a cloud had flecked the dazzling blue overhead, and the gentle breeze had hardly raised a ripple, sixteen of the girl campers had set out for a trip by guide-boat and canoe from their own Halcyon, all the way to beautiful Crystal Lake. They had crossed Lonesome Pond, wild and desolate, and deep Menagha, where the jagged cliffs frowning along its eastern shore flung back echo after echo to their halloos and yodelings. They had tramped over three wooded “carries,” each

guide bearing a boat on his back, and the girls together transporting the light canoes. Evening had found them at Silver Brook Inn, near the head of Crystal Lake. There they had spent the night, and awakened next morning to find the day bright but sultry. Fleecy clouds were scudding up from the south-west as they began their return voyage, and by the time they had finished their luncheon the blue was fast disappearing behind leaden gray clouds. As they prepared to cross Menagha, Miss Lee, the teacher in charge, anxiously questioned the guides.

"Looks like it was fittin' up for a storm. 'Fraid you won't git no moon to-night," Jim Greene answered, and the girls' faces grew overcast too. They had looked forward to cruising on Halcyon after a picnic supper, and gliding back to camp by moonlight, as the crowning pleasure of the whole excursion.

The blue had vanished altogether, and a threatening wind was whipping up the water as the fleet put out from the beach. Before the party was half way across, Menagha was in a tantrum. Angry, choppy little waves, crested with foam, tossed the light boats petulantly. Only experienced swimmers had been allowed to go in the canoes. Carol, the second in command, had singled out the best canoeists to ply the paddles. As soon as they found the squall

upon them she ordered them to keep near shore; but even so it was hard to make headway, with the wind stubbornly swinging the bows out of their course. Frances employed her whole nautical vocabulary to encourage her laboring crew, and issued her commands with sublime disregard of their meaning.

"Haul in the ratlines!" she chanted, unaware that ratlines could not be hauled in. "Throw out the mouse-lines!"

"No, but we 'll throw out the *Mouse* and make her swim," said Jean. "It 's too hard paddling with three!"

"No, you don't! I 'm not a rat to leave a sinking ship!" the *Mouse* responded. "Yo, heave ho! my lads! Unfurl the yards and man the lee scuppers!"

"Frisky, you noodle!" scoffed Jean. "Scuppers are the things the water runs out through."

"Well, and I tell you to man them, to keep the water from running *in* again, you landlubber!" returned the skipper.

"The admiral 's unfurled her hair to the breeze, anyhow," laughed Cecily, for, ahead of them, poor Carol was paddling the *Hist-oh-Hist* against painful odds. Her curly mane was blowing about her shoulders and lashing her face mercilessly. Through her blinding locks she glanced back to see how it fared with the other canoes.

"Let 's try to catch up with her, Cece," said Jean, and they redoubled their efforts, while Frances cried, "Port!" "Starboard!" and "Larboard!" as the fancy seized her, till Jean declared, "We 'd be *overboard* if we obeyed your orders!"

"Belay, my hearty!" was Frances' disrespectful salute to her superior officer as they reached the *Hist*.

"Can't," replied Carol. "My belaying pins are all gone! I wish I had something to batten down my hair with!" For the luckless admiral's hairpins were literally scattered to the winds. "Keep in to leeward, jackies! We 're running head on into a typhoon! Avast, there, St. Cecilia! Don't ram us amidships!"

"Mercy me! Look at those waves! They 're getting bigger and bigger!" cried Betty, passenger in the *Hist*. She was gripping the sides of the canoe, and her face had lost a little of its rosiness.

"I think squalls are jolly—they 're so exciting!" said plucky Phyllis, working away at the bow paddle. "My senses! We shipped water that time!"

"'We are lost!' the captain shouted, as he staggered down the stairs!" Frances serenely quoted.

"Clap that Mouse under the hatches!" Carol sternly commanded. "Don't be scared, Betsey.

This is half the fun of a canoe trip! Menagha looks like a wash-tub on a Monday morning, does n't it? All soap-suds! You don't mind a jolly little tossing like this, do you, Evelyn?" she called back cheerily, as the *Dart*, paddled by Grace Gardner and Winifred Russell, came pressing up to the two canoes in the lead, and she noticed that the girl in the center was paler even than Betty.

"There 's going to be a thunder-storm!" answered Evelyn, a frightened expression on her face. "I *know* I heard thunder!"

"What if there is? We 'll just land and get under the canoes, and be as cosy as can be!" Carol replied. But Evelyn's face remained set with dread as she watched the lowering sky. A moment later a jagged streak of lightning ripped up a huge inky cloud. This was followed by a heavy crash. A fresh gust came swirling down the lake and beat the waves still higher.

"Head for the beach! Follow me!" Carol shouted to the other canoes.

"There 's one of the boats coming back to help us!" said Jean.

Jim Greene with his boat-load was making his way to them over the white-caps. "Pretty slow work, ain't it?" he called as he neared the canoes.

"We're going to land and wait till the squall's over," Carol called back to him.

"That's right!" he answered. "'Tain't safe to keep on with the canoes. You got to git to shore, quick as you can, and you got to stay ashore till to-morrow morning. Looks like it's settin' up to blow all night."

"Mercy on us, Jim!" cried Carol. "Do you expect us to spend the night under our canoes?"

"No, ma'am, but you can spend it up to my sister's. Now, look-a-here, I ain't goin' to take no chances with the canoes! Menagha and Lonesome are two of the squalliess lakes in the Adirondacks. We can git the boats home all right, but 'tain't safe for you to risk it with the canoes. Now you land on that beach. There's a trail starts in there that'll bring you out on the road. Turn to your left and keep on about a mile, and you'll come to a farmhouse. That's where my sister lives, Mis' Perkins. They'll take good care of you there, and when the storm's over they'll drive you on to the boardin'-house in the village, and we'll come back for you in the morning."

"Thank you, Jim, we'll do it," said Carol. "But you'll have to explain to Miss Lee. And how about the others? They'll be drenched ten times over before they get to camp!"

"Now you leave the guides to do the worryin'," soothingly responded Jim. "We'll take



"HEAD FOR THE BEACH! FOLLOW ME!" CAROL SHOUTED TO THE OTHER CANOES.

care of them. Just you leave your canoes turned over on the beach, and run along to Perkins' quick as you can, and you 'll be all right."

"Of course we will! Goodby, girls!" Carol called to the guide's passengers. "Tell Miss Lee not to worry about us."

"And tell Mother we 'll wait until the guides come in the morning, so she need n't worry to-morrow, either," said Cecily.

And so the pleasure party was split asunder by hostile winds and stormy waters. Jim Greene waited till he saw the canoes close to shore, and then rowed off to join the other boats. In a few moments the nine girls were safe on the beach, and dragging the canoes up under the lee of the woody bank. Before they could turn them over the shower broke. Down it came in torrents, and it was not rain alone that pelted them.

"Good gracious, it 's *hailing!*" cried Cecily, as they wrapped themselves in their rain-cloaks.

"Turn your canoes over against the bank, and crawl under them!" said Carol, rolling the *Hist* over. "We can't go on to the farmhouse till this stops. Evelyn, Evelyn! come back! Don't go into the woods!"

A blinding flash had followed the command to make sheds of the canoes, and the other girls lost not a moment in obeying, but Evelyn was scrambling up the bank, as if in the gloom of

the forest she hoped to hide from the storm. Jean flew in pursuit and caught her. But Evelyn cried: "I won't stay here! I can't stand the lightning!"

"Come right back this instant and do what I tell you!" ordered Carol, peremptorily.

"No, I won't! Come on to the house! We 'll be struck if we stay here!"

"Nonsense! We 're as safe on the beach as if we were back in camp!"

"Don't be silly, Evelyn!" cried Jean. "This is n't going to hurt us. It 's fun!" She dashed back to help Phyllis raise the *Dragon-Fly*. There was another flash, and the next moment they saw Evelyn crouching on the beach, her face fairly touching the sand.

"Is she struck?" screamed Betty, peering out horror-stricken from under the *Hist*.

"Struck fiddlesticks!" returned Phyllis.

"Don't be an ostrich, child!" said Carol. "You 're protecting nothing but your nose! Get up and snap your fingers at the storm, like a sensible girl! Come now—this is no time for nonsense! Get under that canoe with Jean and Phyllis, and you 'll be out of the wet, head, heels and all!"

The terrified girl obeyed, and fled for refuge under the *Dragon-Fly*. "Oh, dear! I don't see what made me come on this miserable excursion!" she complained.

“I ’m sure I don’t see what *did* make you come!” said Phyllis. “My patience! You ’re the biggest goose I ever knew! I should think you ’d be ashamed of yourself!”

Under the sheds formed by the canoes the girls were fairly protected, though the rain beat furiously, while flash succeeded flash, and the thunder kept up a deafening cannonade. Between the roars and crashes the sound of gay voices and laughter came from beneath the *Hist* and the *Dart*, proving that neither lightning, a cloud-burst, nor being stranded on a lonely shore, could depress the spirits of the majority. But under the *Dragon-Fly* Evelyn continued to bewail her lot, prophesying that they would all be struck. Jean, at first, did not feel any great sympathy for her cousin. She could not forget what trouble Evelyn had made for Douglas, and for Carol too. Now she seemed bent on being a spoil-sport and doing all that she could to make things as unpleasant as possible for her companions, when the others were bravely treating the affair as a lark! She was frightened, of course! Well, it served her right to have something to cry for! And yet she must be really suffering, to shudder so. Jean remembered her own childish fear of thunder. And then, inch by inch, the silver sword was drawn out of its sheath.

“I know how you feel, Evelyn. I used to be

dreadfully afraid of thunder-storms when I was little. I hid in a bureau drawer once, I was so scared!"

"It goes right *through* me!" moaned Evelyn. She pressed a little closer to Jean, and, as another flash came, down went her head on her cousin's lap.

"Hope she 'll keep still now," muttered Phyllis. "I 'll go under the next canoe if she does n't."

"I don't think she can help it," said Jean. Rather awkwardly she began to stroke Evelyn's tumbled hair. Jean was not used to stroking hair, and began the process shyly. But, as her hand stole to and fro, a new sensation came over her, a protecting feeling toward the girl who had hitherto seemed so proudly self-reliant. Suddenly Evelyn half raised her head.

"I really can't help it," she said piteously. "I was very near a tree that was struck by lightning, when I was six years old, and it shocked me so, I never got over it. I go nearly crazy whenever I 'm out in a thunder-storm."

"Of course you can't help it," said Jean, gently. "But never mind, Evelyn, this will soon be over. That last crash was n't nearly as bad, and I counted seven between it and the lightning. It's getting farther and farther away. We can't possibly be struck now!"

Jean was right. The storm was passing over.

In distant growls and mutterings the thunder died away. The rain fell heavily a few minutes longer; then gradually lessened to a gentle pattering, and finally stopped altogether.

"Now, girls, we must make a dash for the farmhouse before there's another shower!" called Carol, and they set out briskly on the trail through the dripping woods. It was a long one, and by the time they stepped out on the open road a second shower was threatening. They hurried on, but before the farmhouse was in sight they heard an ominous rumble.

"Oh, it's thundering again!" groaned poor Evelyn.

"What *shall* we do if she lies down in the road, as she did in the sand!" thought Jean. Then she was seized with an inspiration. "Let's have a race with the thunder!" she proposed. "Come on, girls! I'll race you to the farmhouse. One to begin! Two to show! Three to make ready! And four to—*go!*" And go they did, jumping puddles and plashing through the mud. In the merry stampede they hardly heard the thunder, till just as the house came into view the shower burst upon them once more. Fear winged Evelyn's feet, and she was winner in that race. But Jean slipped and went down, splash! into a puddle. Carol and Cecily stopped to help their fallen comrade. Jean picked herself up, but they let the race sweep

by them, their attention arrested by a sight a little beyond the gate.

Two horses attached to a rockaway were prancing and backing, and the cause of their excitement was a huge branch which the gale had half torn from a tree by the roadside. Dangling nearly to the ground, it creaked and groaned in the wind. The dancing horses would neither stand nor go on, and from the back of the carriage a woman was leaning forward in argument with the driver.

"She 's frightened, poor thing!" said Carol. "I 'm going to hold those horses and make them behave."

The charioteer was evidently trying to get out to go to the horses' heads, but two tiny gloved hands were gripping him by the sleeve, and a little old lady was expostulating with him, while a second gray-haired woman looked over his shoulder.

"If you 'll only let go of me I 'll lead 'em past the tree, and they 'll be as quiet as kittens," said the man.

"No, don't stir!" said the little old lady. "Don't leave the carriage! I tell you I won't go one step farther with those horses! Susan, get down and help me out."

"In all the rain, ma'am? And you so lame too! It 'll be the death of you, ma'am!" her companion protested.

"I 'll hold the horses," said Carol. "And if you 'll let me, I 'll lead them past the tree. Whoa, boy! Be quiet!" Already she had the off horse by the bridle and was patting him soothingly. Jean followed suit with the other.

"Thank you, my dears, thank you!" said the timid little dame. "But I will *not* go past that tree with them. They 're ready to run! Just hold them still while I step out." Susan objected; her mistress insisted. The driver jumped down and went to the heads of his span.

"Do you live in that house, children?" asked the old lady.

"No, but we 're going to wait there till the shower 's over," replied Carol.

"Then that 's where I 'm going to wait too, till I find a pair of horses that won't run away with me,—if I have to board there for the rest of the summer," said her determined little ladyship. Lame though she was, she had made up her mind to hobble up to the door through the pouring rain, but Carol in her turn had an inspiration.

"We 'll run up to the house and bring out a chair and carry you!" said she. "Come, girls!" Away they sped, before the old lady could say yes or no, and never paused till they reached the farmhouse porch. A babel of voices sounded in the kitchen, and there they

found the other girls drying themselves around the stove, while a pleasant-faced young woman gathered up the rain-cloaks they had shed. Wrinkled Grandmother Perkins fed the fire with kindlings, and a small flaxen-haired brother and sister stared at the company out of solemn china-blue eyes.

Young Mrs. Daniel Perkins was finding her willing hands full, with her influx of dripping guests. Now her breath was fairly taken away as three more invaders burst in.

"Mrs. Perkins, will you take pity on some more drowned people?" asked Carol. Then she explained the old lady's plight, ending: "And she's very lame, so may we borrow this chair to carry her to the house in, please? We'll be back in less than no time."

"Of course you may! Can't I help you?" the young woman answered readily. But her aid was not needed. Calling Frances to assist them, Carol caught up Grandma Perkins's rocker, and the four girls marched off with it.

"Look, Mommer!" suddenly cried Daniel Perkins, junior, as he peeped through the window. "They've got a grandma a-ridin' in our chair!"

The four girls were carrying the rocking-chair between them, and the little old lady was riding in state, under an umbrella, while Susan with the bags trudged after her. They brought her

into the kitchen and set her down before the stove.

Mrs. Perkins had a heart as warm as the kitchen itself. "Jim done just right to send you girls here," said she, "and I 'm glad you ladies come in too. Toast yourselves good, now, and I 'll make you all some tea. Go, set the table, Ruby May."

While Ruby May Perkins was arranging cups and saucers, the little lady was helped out of her wrappings. When the last layer had been peeled off she turned out to be the prettiest little old fairy imaginable, tiny and dainty, with beautiful silver-white hair, and blue eyes, kindly and twinkling.

"Dear, dear, how wet you children must be! I declare I 'm the only dry member of the party." She turned upon Carol who was taking off the small over-shoes. "You child with the long curls, your hair is sopping. Susan, go and hunt up a towel and dry it for her, or she 'll be down with croup to-night!"

"She 's our *teacher!*" giggled Frances.

"I 'd look more dignified if I had n't lost all my hairpins in the gale," said Carol, laughing.

"A teacher, are you? You look to me about old enough for kinder-garten,—but then I 'm half blind," said the dame of the twinkling eyes. "But you know how to take care of old ladies, that 's plain. Thank you, dear children,

and bless you with all my heart. Between being run away with, and drowned, and struck by lightning, I 'd have ended my journey then and there if you had n't come to the rescue."

The tea was soon ready, and a hot and bracing drink it was, though the girlish mouths puckered as they sipped it.

"Tastes like poison!" whispered Frances with a grimace.

"It's good green tea, my dear," said the quick-eared old lady whom they had rescued, "and very much better than black. I was brought up on it,—that's why I'm so spry at eighty!"

Meanwhile the thunder was rolling and the rain descending in still heavier torrents.

"If it keeps up like this, I don't see how we're to reach the boarding-house Jim told us to go to," said Carol.

"I'm sorry my husband ain't here. He'd drive you over there, but he's teaming and won't be back till Saturday," said Mrs. Perkins. "I guess you folks'll have to spend the night with us. We've only two bedrooms, but Grandma'll give up hers and come in with the children and me. Danny, you can sleep up garret like a big man, and Ruby May'll have your bed."

"Then you can sleep in Grandma's room,

Fairy Godmother," said Carol to her white-haired protégée. "You don't mind my calling you that, do you? You look just like a good fairy."

"From the way you're arranging things for me, child, I should say *you* were the fairy godmother!" laughed the old lady.

"We girls are used to camping out," Carol went on. "So just give us some blankets or shawls, Mrs. Perkins, and we'll sleep on the parlor floor."

"You'll be mighty uncomfortable, but I don't see how to fix you any better," said Mrs. Perkins, regretfully. Here little Daniel edged up to his mother.

"Why can't they sleep in the barn, like Popper and I do when there's comp'ny?" he asked.

"That fine big barn out there?" said Carol. "Splendid idea! Good for you, young man!"

"Jolly!" cried Frances.

"Well, now, if you wouldn't mind sleeping out there, you'll find the hay makes a real nice, soft bed," said Mrs. Perkins.

"We'll have a regular barn party!" exclaimed Jean. "It'll be lots of fun!" And most of the other girls agreed that the barn plan was just the thing.

"I won't sleep there," declared Evelyn. "Barns are the very worst places in thunderstorms."

“We ’ll stick Jean up for a lightning-rod,—she ’s tall enough!” said Frances.

“They have *rats* in barns,” said Betty, dolefully.

“Not in ours,” Mrs. Perkins assured her. “It ’s new this Spring. And the thunder ain’t goin’ to keep up long. Now I ’ll go up garret and bring you down that pile of new camp blankets. My husband just bought ’em, to take when he goes guiding. They ’re good and warm.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Perkins. We ’ll be beautifully cosy with such luxuries!” said Carol. “Girls, we ’ll have as much fun at our barn party as we did the night we camped out on Pickerel Island!”

CHAPTER XIX

THE FAIRY GODMOTHER

ALL the rest of the afternoon, and long after the lamps were lighted, the steady downpour continued. But with the troop of jolly Huairarwee girls to make things lively, the farmhouse became the merriest of places. Mrs. Perkins, busy with her cooking, threw many a grateful smile at Carol, who was walking up and down the kitchen with teething Baby Harry in her arms, singing to him softly, while his moon face looked contentedly over her shoulder. The mother could not help now and then stealing to the parlor door for a peep at Jean, Cecily, and Frances as they romped with Daniel and Ruby May, and at the other girls clustered in a ring about the fairy godmother, who was laughing over their stories of camp life. Only Evelyn was silent and dispirited.

“Never mind, child, we ’re both of us fidgits about thunder-storms, so we can keep each other company,” said the old lady. “But *horses* are my pet fear, and how I ’m to find a quiet, respectable pair of old snails such as I like, to

take me over to Halcyon, I 'm sure I don't see!"

"Are you coming to Halcyon?" asked the girls.

"To be sure I am,—to stay at the Inn. Have they anything but shying colts, and dunces to drive them, over there, do you know?"

"Jack could drive you over with Cyclone," said Cecily, pausing in her romp. "He 's my cousin,—Jack Hamilton. He 's only a boy, but he 's a great big one, and he 's a splendid driver. And Cyclone goes very fast, but he *never* shies."

"Jack would bless you for making him drive an old fidgit like me," said the little dame. "Thank you, my dear, for thinking of it, but the name of the horse settles it for me. *Cyclone!* That sounds worse than the tornado you 've just saved me from! No, no, I won't trust a driver under twenty-one at the least."

"Then it 's too bad Court is n't here," said Cecily. "That 's Jack's brother. He 's nearly twenty-two. But he 's gone out West."

"Gone out West!" repeated the old lady. "The young man must have money to burn, to be traveling all over the continent like that!"

"No, he has n't," Cecily frankly owned.

"Carol's brother ran away, and Court and Douglas Gordon went after him, but *Douglas* found him," put in Frances.

"Sh! Frisk. Don't tell about Eric," whispered Jean.

But Frances was a born chatterbox. "Court ought to get the legacy from his great-aunt *now*, ought n't he, Cece?" said she.

"Legacy!" exclaimed the old lady. "Humph! Is your cousin counting on a *legacy* to pay his expenses? Perhaps his great-aunt, herself, might have something to say about that!"

"Oh, that was just a ridiculous joke of his!" said Cecily. "My cousin's terribly generous, and when they used to scold him for giving away his last cent to help people, he'd pretend that a rich old great-aunt of his was going to give him a thousand dollar tip, or leave him a legacy. But of course he was only in fun! And he really does n't know old Miss Van Courtlandt at all! I don't believe he's seen her for years."

"Then he'd better go and pay his respects to her at once, and who knows but she *will* give him a tip?" said the fairy godmother. "And your teacher's brother has run away, has he? And Court and some other boy have gone after him? I'd like to hear about that."

Frances was no less ready to tell about it. Down she sat on the floor at the old lady's feet, and, despite pokes and nudges from Jean and Cecily, gave her listener not merely the history of the late thrilling events, but of the Armstrong failure, too.

"Well, it's all out now," Jean whispered to

Cecily, "so I'm going to tell how plucky Carol's been through it all." She seated herself on the floor beside the loquacious Mouse, and by the time that Mrs. Perkins announced that supper was ready, the little old lady had a pretty clear idea of the happenings of the present summer, not to mention the past one. And a peep into the future, too; for she learned that Carol was bent on obtaining a new position in the fall, when the holidays were over.

The supper was all dessert, as Jean expressed it; for though there was plenty of bread and butter, the main-stays were doughnuts, home-made preserves, and apple and blueberry pie.

"Ain't it good I've just made a whole fresh batch of pies?" said Mrs. Perkins, as they took their places around the kitchen table. "When I make pies, I make a whole lot at once, for the farm help."

Their hostess having regaled them with nothing less than a banquet, the girls entertained her with a concert. In the parlor stood a melodeon, and upon it was an old book of songs.

"Let's sing '*Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep!*'" said Jean. "I'm sure we've been rocked in the cradle to-day!"

Cecily took her place at the melodeon; Carol led the singing, and the girls made the parlor ring to the good old songs. If the fairy god-

mother's heart had not been won already, they would have captured it then.

"It carries me back to my girl days, when the lads used to serenade me," she said.

"It 's stopped raining!" exclaimed Carol, going to the window when the concert was over. "We 'd better run over to the barn now, before it showers again."

Evelyn was convinced that a third thunderstorm was waiting only till she should be reposing in the hay, and Betty still predicted rats, and suggested burglars.

"Burglars in the barn! You won't find burglars no more than rats!" said Mrs. Perkins. But she gave them Bob, the spaniel, and Fluff, the accomplished mouser, to keep them company over night.

Away they trooped to the hayloft. It was a novel bedroom, to say the least; but it was big and airy, and the hay made deliciously soft and fragrant couches.

"It 's too jolly for anything out here," said Jean. "I 'm so glad that dear old lady came and took up the only room!"

"I wonder what her name is," said Cecily. "Do you know, we 've been so busy chattering away, we 've never stopped to ask her! Her maid calls her *ma'am* and *madam*, all the time."

"It never occurred to me that she was anything but 'Fairy Godmother,'" said Carol.

“What a witch of a girl she must have been! I don’t wonder she was serenaded. Look here, we ’re all of us too wide awake to go to sleep just yet. Let ’s slip out again and serenade her.”

If the fairy godmother had peeped out of her window a few moments later, she would have seen a light like a will-o’-the-wisp flitting from the barn to the house. Guided by a lantern the minstrel band was stealing up.

“Give her ‘Moon of the Summer Night,’ ” said Carol. “There ’s no moon, but never mind that!”

Under Grandma Perkins’s window the girls took their stand. The song floated up to the fairy godmother, and she peeped out through the blinds. After the last verse they heard a gentle clapping. They responded to the *encore* with other songs, and when they were through they blew kisses up to the window.

“Good-night, my Romeos! I ’d throw you down roses if I had them,” called the little belle of long ago. “You ’ve given me the sweetest serenade I ever had!”

Back in the loft once more, their lantern carefully extinguished, the girls wrapped themselves in the warm blankets, and, nestling in the hay, one by one sank to sleep. As Jean was slipping off into slumberland she heard a sound, half sigh, half sob, coming from Evelyn’s

corner; and bending over her cousin, she found her quietly crying. "Why, Ev, what 's the matter?" she whispered.

"I can't sleep, Jean, and—I 'm so homesick! I wish I had n't come to camp. I hate it! And all the girls dislike me!" She hid her face in the hay.

"Oh, Ev, don't talk so!" said Jean, too kind-hearted to remind her that it was her own fault. Her arm stole comfortingly about her cousin's shoulder. "*We* are going to be friends again, anyway, aren't we!" she whispered. "Let 's start fresh *now*. I 'll bring my blanket over here, and we 'll hold hands. Then you won't feel lonely, and you 'll go to sleep."

Gathering up her blanket she came back to Evelyn's side. The poor girl was now sobbing passionately, though trying her best to stifle the sound in the folds of her own blanket. Jean's tender heart was completely melted.

"Evelyn, dear,—don't cry so—don't!" she begged, putting her arm about her once more.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! They 'll hear me!" came faintly from the smothering folds. Then as Jean patted her shoulder softly and whispered soothing words, Evelyn raised her head. "Don't! Please don't be sweet to me,—it 's *that* that makes me cry!" she whispered between sobs. "I 've been so hateful to you! But I did n't mean to hurt Douglas! Indeed I

did n't. I did n't mean to start a scandal! I never dreamt it would get to the Inn!"

"Of course you did n't!" answered Jean. "But Carol set everything straight at the Inn, you know. Nobody believes the stuff now!"

"Douglas knows I began it, does n't he?" Evelyn asked, dismally.

"Yes, I had to tell him," Jean admitted.

A low moan broke from her cousin. "Oh, he must *despise* me so!"

Jean checked the involuntary "No," on her lips, but she whispered, "Ev, dear, the minute he gets home I'll tell him you're sorry, and that you did n't mean to do anything to hurt him. That'll make it all right. Why, he's the most forgiving kind of a boy!"

"He'll always despise me just the same, and so will your father and mother and Carol,—and everybody!" Evelyn hid her face again.

"No, they won't," answered Jean, so earnestly that Betty, who was nearest, stirred and half awoke. "They won't despise you a bit, Ev. Just as soon as they know you're sorry that'll make it all right. If you would tell Douglas, yourself, that you're sorry," she added, "that would be best of all. It would be sort of brave and honorable, you know."

A little shudder of dread was the only response. But after a pause Evelyn whispered, "I'm not going to belong to the Order any

more. I've wanted to resign for ever so long."

"Oh, no, Ev, you mustn't resign! We're going to be such good friends now, and everything's to be all nice and happy again."

"No, I've no business to belong!" replied Evelyn, with a touch of the old stubbornness. "I've been disloyal and dishonorable. I'm going to give you back my badge. You can hand it over to someone who won't disgrace it!"

"You sha'n't do any such thing!" answered Jean. "We won't any of us let you resign. What if you weren't loyal before! You'll be loyal *now*. We're going to begin all over again, fair and square, to-morrow, and forget all the miserable things that have happened."

"I sha'n't forget," said Evelyn, doggedly. "You don't really want me to stay in the Order, Jean. You know you don't!"

"I know I *do*! I'd feel dreadfully if you resigned. And you don't want to make me feel badly, do you?"

"No, indeed I don't," murmured Evelyn. "Well,—if you *really* mean it, I'll stay. And I won't be horrid any more, Jean!" A pledge of true and lasting friendship lay in the little squeeze that she gave Jean's hand.

That night, when the clouds parted to let the full moon through, the Queen and her battle maid whom the sword of love had conquered

were off in the land of peaceful dreams, and they had gone on their journey hand in hand.

There was a comical awakening the next morning. The girls sat up staring about them at their odd surroundings, and laughing to see the wisps of hay adorning one another's hair.

"Well, we didn't have any more thunderstorms to disturb us, did we?" said Carol, turning to Evelyn with a bright smile. To her surprise Evelyn smiled back again frankly and happily, as she answered, "No, indeed, we had a beautiful sleep."

Sunshine and cloud were contending in the sky, as the barn-party found when they stepped out to bathe their faces at the pump, and the high wind warned them that the lakes must be white-capped still.

After breakfast, as they were waiting for the guides, who should turn in at the gate but Dr. Hamilton, driving Cyclone; and he was followed by Mr. Lennox with Hiawatha. They had seen that the lakes were too rough to admit of a return by water, and they had driven to the village boarding-house where they had expected to find the girls; but not discovering them there, they had come to the Perkins farm.

"Now Uncle Henry can drive you to Halcyon, and then you won't be afraid with Cyclone," said Cecily to the fairy godmother, who had hobbled out to the porch. Dr. Hamilton drew

up before the door and looked at the white-haired lady, and she looked at him.

“Good morning, Henry,” said she. “You didn’t expect to see *me* here, did you?”

“Aunt Sarah! Is that you? How did *you* come here?” exclaimed Dr. Hamilton. Down from the carriage he sprang, and greeted her with a hearty kiss.

“I hear that my nephew Van Courtlandt has gone out West,” said the old lady. “If he doesn’t come home quick he’ll be too late to get his tip. I’m going to be only a fortnight at Halcyon.”

Cecily and Jean collapsed against the Virginia-creeper vines; Frances sat down on the steps and gasped.

“What are you fainting away for, children?” asked the fairy godmother. “It’s quite true my namesake has n’t seen ‘*old Miss Van Courtlandt*’ since he was a little rascal of a boy, but it’s high time *she* saw *him* again, if there’s to be any talk of a legacy!” She chuckled like a witch over the perplexed amazement in the countenance of the Doctor.

The whole party could by no means be accommodated in the two surreys, but the stage route from the Junction led past the farm, and already the stage was in sight. Carol and Jean ran down to the gate to hail it. There were only two passengers that morning, and they

were both boys. A moment more, and a cry of joy broke from the girls. "It's Eric and Douglas!"

The stage halted; down jumped the travelers. Carol threw her arms around the prodigal, and he smothered her with a loving bear-hug. Jean and Douglas gripped each other's hands, their faces radiant.

"*You* found him, Douglas! I told them all you would! I knew you'd be the one!" cried Jean. "How did you get back so soon? We didn't expect you till to-morrow. Didn't you stop in New York?"

"No, we came back by Chicago and Buffalo to Albany, and then came straight up here. Is Court home yet?"

"No, he's out in Michigan still, seeing to some business for Mr. Armstrong," answered Jean.

Eric and his sister released each other, and Carol clasped the hand of her faithful knight. "Douglas, I can never thank you as long as I live!" she said. "*None* of us can ever repay you!"

"Don't, Carol—please," he begged. "Remember what you did for *me* last year!"

While the stage waited, the storm-bound travelers gave their entertainers cordial thanks. Mrs. Perkins desired no compensation for her kindness, but she found that the gratitude of her

guests was not her only reward. Mr. Lennox, who had come prepared to pay the boarding-house bills of the stranded young ladies, made her a full recompense for her hospitality, and Miss Van Courtlandt proved herself a true fairy godmother to the whole family.

When the good-bys had been said and the stage continued its journey, Jean was beside Douglas in Eric's place. Her father drove the young runaway and his sister in his own carriage.

"Farewell, Conquering Hero!" Carol called back to the head of the League, as the light surrey left the lumbering stage behind. Then she turned to her brother. "Now, old man, tell me everything. I know you ran away to find work and help the family, and as soon as I could tell her you were safe, I wrote that much to poor Mother,—but that's all any of us know."

"I want to tell you too, Mr. Lennox," said Eric, and as Douglas's guardian turned to listen, he burst out impetuously: "I got into an awful scrape, and Gordon got me out of it, like the brick he is! And now I can't pay him back a cent! But I *will* some day! I'm going to get a job as quick as I can, and I'll work till I've paid it up, if it takes me ten years!"

"You got into debt, Eric? Was that it?" asked Carol, anxiously.

"Yes. It started way back in the winter, at

school. I—well, I don't know how it happened—I didn't think I was running up much of a bill—but a fellow can't be stingy! I had to treat the other fellows, and then—there was the new building for the boat club. I promised fifty dollars."

"Mercy, Eric!" cried his sister, aghast; and Mr. Lennox remarked, "You do things on a large scale, young man."

"Well, and then that old fake separator came along—."

"*Separator!*" Carol interrupted. "What on earth do you mean?"

"It's a machine for separating gold from the sand. A fellow named Renshaw invented it,—Stan Rossiter knows him. Well, the shares were selling at twenty-five cents, and Stan said it was such a chance! He bought a lot, and I did too,—I bought eight hundred!"

"Two hundred dollars worth!" cried poor Carol. "Why, Eric, you ought not to have put *one penny* into it without asking Father!"

"You must have had a generous allowance," commented Mr. Lennox.

"N—no, but I had the hundred my Uncle Eric gave me. I drew it out of the Savings Bank, and—and then I borrowed another hundred from the fellows at school."

"Alan knew nothing about it!" his sister broke in.

"No, I didn't tell him. Well, I thought I had to hustle to get the shares,—so I just put everything into it. And then, of course, there was that fifty I'd promised for the boat club. I'd been meaning to get it out of the bank, but here I'd gone and used up every cent I had. I couldn't back down after I'd promised, so I had to borrow for that. But I thought the invention was going to pay right off, you know. And I was going to save up my allowance and ask Dad for more. But then the failure came, and my allowance had to stop, and I couldn't raise a cent! I had all those bills to pay too, and I found I was owing about two hundred all around! And then, when I saw what a scrape I was in, I didn't dare tell Dad, and I knew Howard and Al would say I was a fool. And I was,—an awful old fool! Oh, come now, Sister! Pitch into me! But don't *look* at me like that!"

"Eric, you should have gone straight to Father and told him everything," said Carol. "It was the only right and honorable thing to do. Don't you know how full of love and sympathy he is? He understands so well what it means to be a boy."

"I know. I was a donkey all along," muttered Eric, dropping his eyes before the love and grief that looked out of hers. "Well, I didn't know what to do. So finally I told Gor-

don I was in a scrape, and he promised he would n't give me away. So then I told him all about it. He tried to get me to own up to Dad, but I just *could n't*. But he said he had two hundred dollars, and he 'd pay all my debts. And he did!"

"*He paid them all!*" exclaimed Carol. "He must have given all the money he had in the world! I never knew anything so noble and self-sacrificing in my life! But, oh, I never dreamt! Mr. Lennox, can you ever forgive this boy?" She looked imploringly at Jean's father, and he answered kindly, "Douglas was glad to do anything for a brother of yours, I know."

"I thought I 'd be able to pay him back in just a little while," Eric went on, "but I waited till I was tired! And after I came up here, I got a letter from Rossiter. He said he was going to run away and join Renshaw in San Antonio, and go out to Arizona to see how the concern worked. He said there was a big chance for a fellow out there, and I 'd better join him, so I made up my mind I 'd skip to San Antonio too. And I did,—hooked rides, you know,—and when I got there, I found the machine had gone up the spout! And Rossiter and I are dead broke, and so is Gordon. But I 'll pay it back yet! And I 'm going to write to Dad to-day and tell him the whole thing."

"That 's the right spirit," said Mr. Lennox. "I 'm glad to see you 're manly enough to make a clean breast of it now."

"And we 'll both of us work till we 've paid the two hundred back," said Carol, earnestly. "But, Eric, we can never repay Douglas for *all* he 's done,—for the way he stood by you like a brother from first to last! The splendid, noble fellow! Eric Armstrong, I know Stan Rossiter 's been your hero, but just you take *Douglas* now, and keep *him* for your hero,—you could n't have a better!"

"You 're right there!" cried Eric. "There 's nobody like Gordon!"

Jean and Douglas arrived at Rest-a-bit to find father and mother waiting on the porch, and with them Carol and Eric. The mother gave her "son" a loving welcome home. Then Mr. Lennox grasped him warmly by the hand. "Well done, Douglas!" he said. "I 'm proud of you, my boy. You 've proved yourself worthy of our trust!"

Jean thrilled at the words, but she did not yet understand their full meaning.

"Gordon, why did you keep so mum? Why did n't you tell me people had been slandering you?" Eric burst out. "I did n't know a thing about it till Sister told me just now! And here you 've been holding your tongue through it all, just because I asked you not to tell on me!

I ought to be shot and hanged too! Go ahead, now, everybody, and tell people what a fool I was, and set it straight."

"Douglas, Eric has told me everything," said Carol. "What a brother you've been to him! Jean, he gave his two hundred dollars to save Eric from debt! Oh, Douglas, our hearts are just brimming over with gratitude! No, no, you can't stop me,—I *will* speak out, and you must listen respectfully, no matter how you hate to be thanked! But we can never thank you as you deserve,—nobody could! I'll tell you one thing, though, if it's any reward to know it: you're going to make a man out of Eric by what you've done for him. If he turns out the kind of man we hope to see him, we'll thank *you* for helping to make him so. And you'll be his brother always, won't you, Douglas? He won't do so wrong again,—he's learning his lesson; and you can influence him more than anyone else, I'm sure. And the best wish that I can wish for Eric is that he may grow to be like *you*!"

CHAPTER XX

ALADDIN THE SECOND

EVELYN'S contrition was deeper than ever when, that same morning, she learned from Eric's sister where Douglas's two hundred dollars had gone. She was resolved to make honorable amends, but it was agony to think of facing the boy who, through her fault, had suffered from slander.

"Don't be afraid, Evelyn," said Carol. "You'll find him only too ready to forget all about it. Why, just think! The whole wretched affair came about through the dreadful scrape my own naughty little brother fell into! But, in spite of all the trouble he made for him, Douglas has never given Eric one hard word!"

Douglas had been at home but a few hours when he saw Evelyn coming up to the porch of Rest-a-bit. She walked with quick, nervous steps, and when she saw him a burning blush overspread her face. He stepped forward to meet her and held out his hand, with a frank smile.

“How do you do, Evelyn? This is rather a jolly old ending to things, isn’t it? We got the runaway back again in great shape!”

Timidly Evelyn put a trembling hand into his. “Douglas, I want to apologize,” she faltered. “I’m very, *very* sorry for all the trouble I made you.”

“Oh, that’s all right!” Douglas grasped the cold hand and pressed it heartily. “Don’t think about it any more. Does a fellow good to get a knock once in a while! Come out on the lake with Jean and me,—don’t you want to? We’re going in the canoe.”

Court returned before his great-aunt left Halcyon, and she had a chance to study her grandnephew. The day of his arrival a beach tea was held at Eagle Cliff. All the inmates of Huairarwee, Rest-a-bit, and Hurricane were there, and even spry old Aunt Sarah Van Courtlandt, herself, who drove behind Cyclone to the rendezvous, with her namesake as char-ioteer. Beneath the high crag the rocks made a natural arm-chair, and there amid cushions the girls seated their fairy godmother. After tea the members of the League held a meeting around the stone chair, and they summoned Carol to attend it. Court enthroned her by the old lady’s side, and Jean mounted a table-like rock which made an admirable rostrum.

“Illustrious Councillor of State,” began her majesty, “the hour has come for you to know the meaning of the mystic letters *L. S. R.* They stand for the *League of the Signet Ring.*”

Jean paused impressively, and Carol recalled Douglas’s letter in which, as Archon, he had informed her of her appointment to the post of instructor in athletics. She had vainly coaxed to have the mystery of the initials unfolded.

“Is *that* what they mean!” she exclaimed. “I might have known that wonderful signet had something to do with it! But I thought Douglas must be Archon of a modern branch of the *Learned Society of Rosicrucians*, at least! Well, I think it’s about time your majesty enlightened your humble servant! What’s the object of the League, may I ask?”

“*You* are the object,” replied Jean. “We all love you so much that, when the troubles came last Spring, we nearly broke our hearts thinking there was nothing we could do to help you. And then Douglas thought of something that we really *could* do,—rally around you and show you we were loyal. He proposed that we should form an annex to the Silver Sword, for the sake of standing by you, and call it *The League of the Signet Ring*. So we founded our League, and we made him the head of it, and all the rest of us here are members. And we’ve made Fairy Godmother an honorary member.

I 'm afraid most of us have n't been able to do much, but we 're true to you and we love you, Alruna, dear!"

"You think you have n't done much for me!" cried Carol, springing to her feet. "Every single one of you has done more for me than I can ever tell you, cheering me up and helping me to be brave! I can never, *never* tell you how full of gratitude my heart is to the members of the League! I said once to Jean, and I 'll say it again now: I 'm downright thankful for the dark times I 've been through, for they 've taught me what it means to have *true friends!*

"You 've saved my brother, and given him back to me! You 've saved *me* from slaving in the city heat, and brought me here,—that was the work of the League, I know. You 've fought for me with the silver sword, and protected me with the golden shield! They say clouds have a silver lining, and it 's true. The clouds looked very black to me at first, but I found they had both a *gold* and a silver lining!"

Court now came forward with something in his hand which he had hitherto been carefully hiding. It was a hard reddish-black substance, and on it reposed the amethyst ring.

"Here comes the signet back again!" said Carol. "But what on earth is that thing it 's on? A piece of coal?"

“What *in* earth, you ’d better say,” Court corrected. “It was buried pretty deep. Lady Alruna, I have a story to tell. I ’m not much on finding lost brothers, but I don’t make a bad sort of an Aladdin. In the course of my travels I found a rock with an iron ring in it. I lifted it up, and I found a staircase leading down into a subterranean palace, full of silver and gold and precious stones. The palace was built inside of an iron mine, and here ’s a piece of iron ore to prove it!” Then, while the wonder grew in Carol’s eyes, Court turned from the Arabian Nights to plain facts. He told her of his discovery that the Armstrongs’ Western acres were richly stocked with iron, and how in the hotel at Marquette he had overheard the plot to buy them in before their owner should discover their true value.

“And now,” he ended, “your father has just sold them for what they are really worth, and it ’s a good big price!” If Aladdin’s genie had then and there appeared, Carol could not have looked more amazed. “And I have a message for you from your father. He says that though this does not make him rich, yet with this money your family can live,—not in luxury, but in comfort,—and you can still keep Wyndgarth. He won’t have to sell the old home after all!”

Carol’s color came and went, and her heart beat fast. If she had found herself mistress of

the palace of gems, not one tenth of the joy would have shone in her face that Court saw there now. "You 've saved my father!" she cried, and she gave him both her hands in gratitude. "I believe you 've saved his life! The burden was too much for him! It was crushing him down, and now you 've taken it away! And you 're giving us back Wyndgarth! Oh, it 's too wonderful! It 's too beautiful! But is it really true, or am I dreaming, Court—I mean Aladdin? No, you 're the *genie of the ring, himself!*"

"Upon my word, I believe I 'm going to be proud of my grandnephew after all!" exclaimed Miss Van Courtlandt. "But what are you dawdling with that ring for? Put it on her finger, Court!"

The new Aladdin slipped the ring on Carol's finger, and then the fairy godmother handed him a check. "My first *tip* to you for being a good boy!" said she.

"Whew! You 're a *lady* genie, Auntie! But I 'm afraid I shall never deserve such a magnificent tip as this!" said Court, and he promptly saluted her faded cheek.

Frances leaned toward Cecily and whispered, "Now are n't you glad I told her all about Court and the legacy, that day at the farm-house? Did n't I do a fine piece of work as the Alruna of the League!"

“Now that the ring ’s safe on Carol’s finger she ’ll have to keep it there,” said Jean. “I ’m sure *I* ’ll never trust myself to wear it again, so many queer things have happened to it! I ’d be afraid it would vanish for good and all. Let ’s make her Guardian of the Royal Signet!” Thereupon the Alruna was formally appointed guardian of the ring.

The Leaguers now pressed about, eagerly congratulating Carol, whom Aladdin the Second had served so well.

“And you won’t have to work, after all, will you, Big Sister?” said Jean.

“Yes, Little Sister, I *shall* work, for a while at least,” Carol answered. “We ’re not *rich* even now, you know. And, besides, Fairy God-mother and I have a plan!”

“I ’m half blind as I tell you, though nobody ’ll believe me,” said Miss Van Courtlandt; “and I have to be in New York this winter, close to the oculist’s, or I shall grow blinder still. And I ’m getting old enough to need a companion, so this girl ’s coming to take care of me for a while. I ’ve adopted her, Court, as a grand-niece.”

This new relationship seemed to please the grandnephew immensely; but what delighted him most of all was to watch Carol’s face, glowing and sparkling with the happiness that he had brought her, after the long, dark season of

anxiety. The young girl was seeing rosy visions. Her father would now be able to receive the treatment and care so sorely needed. She saw him growing stronger and better as the months went by, and the load of trouble lifted from the dear mother's heart. She pictured Alan going to college after all, and Eric returning to the school where he would have Douglas near him, to influence him for good. Well might her lips smile and her eyes shine!

The four-footed member of the League, Hiawatha, had brought Jean's mother and Cecily's to Eagle Cliff, after which he had been released from shafts and harness. Before the meeting could adjourn Eric came up, riding him bareback. Then, standing with her arms around the neck of the beautiful bay, who listened as if he understood it all, Carol told her brother the marvellous news. Eric almost tumbled from his mount in his overpowering amazement.

"Bully for Court!" were his first words as he recovered his breath. Down he sprang to wring the hand of that "valiant champion," and then lead three rousing cheers for him. The cheers were enough to make a war-horse bolt, but Hiawatha was well used to Armstrong ebullitions, and merely twitched his ears and stared at the jubilant band.

"Now, Sister, don't you love me for running away?" Eric complacently inquired. "If I

had n't skipped, Court would n't have found out about the iron. I guess by this time Dad thinks I 'm the most useful son he has!"

"You certainly *have* proved yourself extremely useful, young man!" replied Carol, laughing. "And your sister loves you,—there 's no denying it! But please don't try to do us any *more* services of that kind. One is n't likely to find an Aladdin's palace twice in a life time."

Eric turned to Douglas with an air of vast relief. "Gordon, we can pay up the two hundred all in a bunch now!"

"Oh, that 's fixed up all right," Douglas answered. "I got a check from your father this morning."

The meeting closed with cheers for the Archon, and when night had fallen another gathering was held at the foot of Eagle Cliff. While the picnickers were chatting around their small fire, Jack suddenly woke the echoes with a mighty blast on the camp bugle.

Attention thus gained, the Princess of the Scroll surprised her Queen by announcing, "Ladies and gentlemen, the battle maids invite you to a starlight rally of the Order!"

This time Jean was enthroned beside the Fairy Godmother, and Cecily mounted the rostrum.

"Yesterday we battle maids held a secret ses-

sion at the request of her majesty's cousin," said she. "The Chief Councillor presided in the Queen's place. At this meeting Evelyn announced her resolution to resign from the Order—."

"Oh, Evelyn,—no! You must n't!" Jean interrupted.

"May it please your majesty to preserve the calm befitting your lofty station, and allow her royal highness to proceed," said the Alruna, in a tone of respectful rebuke. And Cecily went on:

"My sentence was only half finished. Your majesty's cousin announced her resolution to resign—*unless* we made you *Queen for life!*"

"Evelyn!" was all that Jean could gasp out. Her cousin bowed her endorsement of Cecily's words.

"The Chief Councillor, the Princesses, and all the other battle maids immediately took the same resolution," Cecily continued. "And, your majesty,"—she made Jean a low obeisance—"we unanimously elected you Queen of the Silver Sword for life!"

Jean sank back upon her rock-throne. "Elected me—for *life!*" she repeated.

"Yes. When your majesty founded the Order, you said it was to last all our lives. But we've bound ourselves to resign, every one of us, unless you promise to reign over us as long as you live."

Jean was on her feet in an instant. "But I can't! It's not right!" she protested. "It's not fair to the rest of you to have me *always* Queen."

But her maidens would not take back their threat, so the happy girl was obliged to yield and promise. And Eagle Cliff echoed back the cheers for the Queen of the Silver Sword.

None shouted, "Long live the Queen!" with more enthusiasm than did the Archon, and when there was stillness again he proposed three cheers for the Queen's cousin. After this the Order hurrahed for the League and its founder, and the League returned the compliment. The fairy godmother and her adopted grandniece were cheered in their turn. Finally, when even his stentorian lungs were glad of rest, Court, as Aladdin, in lieu of rubbing a lamp, set fire to some powder in a gipsy kettle on the sand. A ruddy smoke began to ascend. A red light spread over beach and cliff, and the whole company became illumined in the glow. It faded, but now a green light flooded rock and strand; then a blue, then a white, bathed the scene. Lastly the red fire shone forth again, and in its joyous brilliance the young Queen stood, and around her the ring of loyal battle maids over whom she was to reign through all the years to come.

CHAPTER XXI

WYNDGARTH AGAIN

THE League of the Signet Ring had done its work faithfully and well. Carol no longer needed its help; its labor of love was ended; and that gathering at the foot of Eagle Cliff was its last meeting until two more Septembers had passed and still another had come. Then, three whole years having glided by since the great rock echoed the shout "Long live the Queen!" a grand rally of the Order and the League took place once more, but not on the shore of the Adirondack lake. Wyndgarth was the scene of the reunion.

The lingering breath of summer tempered the crispness of early fall; but already the trees were putting on autumn's livery of red and gold, and Tallulah-on-the-Hudson looked as lovely as in the season of blossoms and unfolding leaves. So thought Betty Randolph, as she alighted at the Tallulah station on that bright Wednesday afternoon, and caught sight of the glow in the distant woods and the blue expanse of the wide river.

Betty was now nineteen, as sonsy and rosy-cheeked as in the old Hazelhurst days, and a very stylish young person too, dressed in a natty Parisian costume of harmonious shades of brown, and carrying a suit-case adorned with various European labels. This experienced globe-trotter was starting in quest of the carriage which was to meet her, when she saw three girls hurrying down the platform, waving their hands in greeting. She recognized them at once, though it was three years since she had seen their faces. She rushed forward, and in another moment was embracing and being embraced.

“Dear old Betsey! Are you really back again!”

“St. Cecilia! Hilda! Frances,—Mousie! How do you all happen to be here to meet me? Did *you* just arrive too?”

“Our train got in just five minutes before yours, so we waited for you. We all came on together. And you really haven’t forgotten how to speak English, you foreigner? We were polishing up all our French and German for you!”

“Don’t let me hear one word of French or German,—and don’t you *dare* call me a foreigner! I’m the same old American Betsey that I always was, and all the time I was at school in Switzerland I was so homesick for

Hazelhurst and the battle maids that I felt as if I *must* fly back again! Where's Jean? When is she coming?"

"She's here before us. She's been staying at Wyndgarth for a week, helping the bride get ready," answered Cecily. "Rose Hamilton and Stella are coming with Jack this afternoon, and the rest of the battle maids will all be here early to-morrow morning. Not one member of the Order or of the League will be absent! Won't it be a glorious reunion! This way, Betsey,—the carriage is waiting for us behind the station."

"Let me have a good look at you all first," said Betty. "I knew you at the first glance, but I'm sure you must have *some* gray hairs and wrinkles by this time!"

"We expected to see you with an ear-trumpet," declared Frances. "But you're just the same round rosy-posy that you always were!"

"And you're a worse witch than ever, Frisky Mouse! One does n't need to look at you twice to see that!" returned Betty, holding at arm's length the piquant little brunette, whose gipsy face and dark, dancing eyes laughed out from under a poppy-garden of a hat. Then she surveyed the fair, slender lass with the soft hazel eyes and the halo of sunny hair.

"St. Cecilia, you've grown as pretty as a

picture! Now, Hilda, let me inspect *you*! Oh, dear! You're so tall and stately, and look so learned, you college girl, I'm quite afraid of you!"

"I'm overawed at sight of *you*," laughingly replied the bright-faced girl who had succeeded Betty as Princess of the Treasure. "You've blossomed into the most stylish young lady! One doesn't need to look twice to see that *Mademoiselle Randolph* came home by way of Paris!"

"Come and overawe our driver, too, Betsey," said Frances. "And see if you recognize him."

They led Betty to the carriage from which a big, broad-shouldered fellow of seventeen sprang down and came forward politely to greet her and relieve her of her suit-case.

"How do you do, Miss Betty?" said he, holding out his hand. "You don't know me, I suppose?"

Betty looked up at the healthful, ruddy face, the frank brown eyes and the tawny hair. "It can't be Eric?" she cried.

"Eric it is! There's a good deal more of me than when you saw me last," he answered, as they shook hands.

"I should think so!" exclaimed Betty. "Why, you're grown up! And you were only a little boy that summer at Halcyon!"

"When I skipped to Texas? Well, I've

never run away since. Have I?" He turned to the other girls for corroboration.

"No, you 've been a good boy," they assured him, and the whole party laughed at the recollection of his famous escapade.

It was in the autumn following that memorable summer that Betty Randolph's plans had unexpectedly changed, and she had been sent to a school in Switzerland, instead of staying to graduate with the rest of the Order. A year of travel had followed her school course, and she had returned to her native land just in time for the grand reunion. Cecily and Hilda placed her between them, on the drive to Wyndgarth, glad to find her the same warm-hearted, unspoiled girl; and Frances, on the front seat, turned around again and again from her laughing chat with Eric to join in the reminiscences of the last three years.

"Does n't it seem only yesterday that we were spinning along this road in an auto, going to that glorious Easter house-party!" exclaimed Betty. "And now we 're here again—only it 's for a wedding! Won't Carol make a beautiful bride!"

"Indeed she will!" Hilda heartily agreed.

"She grows lovelier every year, I think," said Cecily. "Her face seems to grow sweeter and sweeter. I 'm very proud of my cousin-to-be! And Jean 's going to make a stunning

maid of honor! She really *is* queenly now!"

"And we're all to be bridesmaids!" cried Betty, giving Hilda's hand and Cecily's each a little squeeze of felicity. "Hasn't Carol arranged everything in the most ideal way!"

"She'd like to have the whole Order for her bridesmaids," said Cecily. "But that would be a little *too* overwhelming! So she had to content herself with asking the girls of the League and one more, to make an even six, besides the maid of honor. We had to draw lots to see which of the battle maids should be the lucky sixth."

"And the lot fell to me!" added Hilda. "The others are sea-green with envy! Phyl declares she's my enemy for life!"

"We'll have to take you into the League to protect you, Hilda," said Frances, overhearing. "This is a League wedding, Betsey, with Court as bridegroom and Jack as best man, and Douglas to *ush* if he gets home in time, and the rest of us as bridesmaids!"

"Has Douglas been away?" asked Betty.

"Yes, he's been abroad all summer. You two ought to have arranged a meeting over on the other side," said Cecily. "He has a great-uncle in Scotland, you know—the laird of Glen Yarrow—and a lot of distant cousins, and they invited him to visit them. So he spent his vacation over there, traveling in Scotland and

England. He's scheduled to arrive to-night, but we're so afraid he'll be late!"

Here Eric turned around. "Cecily, did you hear? We're going to have a squad of mounted policemen up here to-morrow, to protect Court. The Tallulah people are threatening to mob him!"

"For taking Carol away? I don't blame them," replied Court's cousin. "Ah, me! It's going to be a case of

'She took our daylight with her,
The smiles that we love best,
With morning blushes on her cheek,
And pearls upon her breast.' "

"They're making an awful row about it, anyhow," said Eric. "The village kids are howling!"

"Poor Court! He's a very unpopular person about here, I'm afraid!" exclaimed Cecily. "I don't suppose you've heard, have you, Betsey—he's going to carry his bride off to South America for the winter!"

"South America!" cried Betty.

"Yes! He has to go to Brazil and Argentina for the engineering company he's in, to investigate tunnels and railroads and bridges and things! They sail in less than a month. And how Tallulah's going to flourish at all without Carol, I'm sure I don't see!"

“Is she the Alruna of *Tallulah*, as well as of the Order?” asked Betty. “Girls, see here! I’ve hardly heard a word of Silver Sword news since I went abroad. I heard when Carol was engaged—she wrote to me, herself—and I heard how you’d all graduated successfully, and that Jean was valedictorian, and that a lot of you were going to college. And Frisk politely sent me an invitation to her *coming-out*, which she knew I could n’t very well accept, considering I was on the other side of the ocean! But that’s all I know about any of you! It’s my own fault, of course. I’m the *worst* correspondent that ever existed! But I’m the same loyal Betsey still, and I’ve tried my best to use my silver sword over there in Lausanne, though I did n’t have any battle maids to keep me company! See—I wear my badge still, and I think of you girls whenever I look at it. Now *do* begin and tell me the history of all of you for the last three years. I’m hungry to hear.”

“And you *shall* hear, dear old girl! Your heart’s as true as your pen is lazy,” said Cecily. “I’ll give you our history, and then you must give us yours. I’ll begin with the bride. You know the winter that you went abroad Carol was companion to Miss Van Courtlandt, our fairy godmother. Well, after that, Miss Van Courtlandt went to live with the Hamiltons; but Carol said she was going to be a working

girl still, and so for two more summers she was instructor in athletics at Huairarwee. The Hazelhurst girls come back to Halcyon every year. But Carol 's been mostly a *home* daughter. Her father 's ever so much better now—better than they thought he could ever be—and they say her care and sunshininess have helped to make him so. And she 's an all-around Alruna, too, for she 's taken the village children under her wing, and formed them into a guild, which she calls the Baby Sister of the Silver Sword. They have meetings at Wyndgarth, and royal times, of course, and she teaches those youngsters how to use the sword and shield, I can tell you! And the big girls, too, who work in the mill—she has a club for them. That 's a sister of the Order, too. The girls adore her, and she helps them in their puzzles and troubles, and makes life bright for them! Her friends here are to carry on the work for her when she 's gone, but the Guild and the Club will never forgive Court!”

“Nanno won't either, will she?” said Hilda. “Betty, the Silver Sword baby is being brought up at Wyndgarth!”

“Mercy! Carol has n't adopted her, has she?” cried Betty.

“No, nothing quite so alarming,” replied Cecily. “But you know what kind of a home she had. Well, first her father died and next

her baby brother. And then the poor mother was taken ill, and when she found she was dying she gave Nanno to Carol. So the Armstrongs took her to live with them, and Carol's been bringing her up. She succeeded in *unspoiling* her, and they're all just as fond of our Baby as they can be! Those two dear old servants of theirs, Andrew and Aggie, are so devoted to Nanno that they wouldn't part with her for anything; so now, after Carol's married, they're going to take care of her as if she were their own little granddaughter. And she's to be trained up to be a fine, useful girl. She and little Anne Rossiter are going to be flower girls, to-morrow!"

"Who's Anne Rossiter?" asked Betty.
"The name sounds familiar."

"Um—I don't wish to speak too loud for fear of embarrassing Eric," said Cecily, lowering her voice. "But don't you remember his friend, Stanton Rossiter, whom he was going to meet when he ran away? And when Douglas went down South to find Eric he met little Anne on the train, and she told him her brother Stanton had run away, and that gave Douglas the clue at once. You remember, don't you?"

"Of course I do, now. And is that little Anne really going to be one of Carol's flower girls?"

"Yes, and she's a little peach!" answered Eric, looking back over his shoulder, with a

grin of amusement. "Go ahead, Cecily! I'm blushing like fury! I heard all you said about the painful past! Never mind, though. That separator turned out to be a *uniter*! It's made a bond of union between the two families!"

"It really has," said Cecily, laughing. "I *will* go ahead, thank you, sir. I'm giving this benighted European traveler a lecture on modern history." And she continued: "Carol always said that Anne Rossiter helped to find Eric, and that she owed her a big debt of gratitude. So she began to correspond with the child, and that was the beginning of a real friendship between the Armstrongs and the Rossiters. Stanton's at Yale now with Douglas and Jack and Alan, and turning out very well. And little Anne is rather delicate, and needs a cool climate, so this year she's to enter the grammar department of Hazelhurst Hall. So, as she was coming north, Carol invited her to be a flower girl. Carol adores children, you know. And Eric evidently adores the small Anne! There now, I've told you what our Alruna's been about, besides promising to be my cousin-in-law! It had to be a long engagement, Betty. Court had to get a start in business, and Carol felt she was needed at home till her father's health was better; but now the waiting time's over at last. To-morrow she'll be Carol *Hamilton*!"

“That ’s a lovely piece of history!” cried Betty. “Now tell me about my Queen and all the battle maids.”

“St. Cecilia ’s lectured enough. It ’s my turn!” put in Frances. “Betsey, you don’t know what you missed, not graduating with us! There we all came marching up to get our diplomas, and her majesty gave the valedictory, and dear old Grandma Evelyn had the salutatory. And, my dear, she beamed as if she was tickled to death to play second fiddle to Jean!”

“And then Frisky deserted the paths of learning for the giddy world,” Hilda interrupted. “Her present profession is leading cotillions! And Thekla ’s studying the violin, and Blanche and Adela are at home, too. But the remaining eight of us are all at Vassar! We vowed we ’d go to whatever college our Queen chose.”

“How jolly for you! And you have meetings of the Order, there?”

“Of course we do, and Jean wears her silver crown.”

Then Betty put a solemn question. “Girls,—it ’s wicked of me to ask—but does Evelyn ever have ‘fits’ now?”

“Fits!” repeated Cecily. “Why, Betty, I believe we ’ve forgotten there ever *were* such things as fits! No, indeed, she never has them. She ’s an odd, reserved girl, and people think

her cold, but she 's as true and loyal as you are, and she and Jean are great friends now. Jean 's one of the finest Greek scholars in the whole class, and Evelyn 's shining in science and mathematics!"

"Yes, and when the eight Silver Sworders are all M.A.'s, they 're going to found a Silver Sword University, and Jean 'll be president, and all the rest professors!" So romanced Frances, regardless of the fact that she still wore the shield of truth.

By the time the two collegians about to return to Vassar for their sophomore year had described their experiences as freshmen, and Betty had told of her life in Lausanne, the old colonial mansion was in sight.

"It looks just the same, except that the maples are turning red, and when I was here before, the tulips were coming out!" said Betty, as they passed in through the gate of Wyndgarth. "There 's Hamlet! How scared I was that first time, when he rushed out at us like a lion!" The Great Dane sprang up barking but wagging his tail, and his mighty voice served as a herald's trumpet to announce to those indoors the arrival of the guests. "Jean! There 's Jean! Oh, and there 's Carol, too!" Betty waved and kissed her hand, and so did the other three girls as they saw the Queen and the bride come flying out to the porch.

The carriage stopped. "My battle maids! My bridesmaids!" cried Carol. "Welcome back to Wyndgarth!"

"Welcome back again, Betsey!" cried Jean.

The returned exile flew from the Alruna's embrace to the Queen's; and when all four guests had been warmly greeted, the scene at the station was re-enacted, only this time it was Jean and Carol whom Betty merrily surveyed, and who studied her in return.

Yes, Cecily had spoken truly. Carol was lovelier at twenty-two than in the early bloom of nineteen, and in her face one read many "sweet records" and "promises as sweet." And Jean was now a noble looking girl, her bright face full of womanly strength, while from those deep blue eyes of hers the same earnest, truthful, loving soul looked forth.

"You runaway! I can't tell you how glad we all are to have you back again!" exclaimed Jean. "We could n't have a real reunion without *you*."

"I'd have broken my heart if I could n't have come to it," answered Betty. "It's so good to see you all again, I really believe if I tried *very* hard I could cry for joy!"

"Please don't try," begged the bride. "I won't allow any showers even the day before my wedding! Come indoors, dear people, and pardon the hubbub and confusion you'll find.

There are so many things to be done at the last."

Once more the girls found themselves standing in the great square hall. Before they could ascend the staircase, a clattering was heard, and a little maiden all in white came flying down to meet them, while another, in a blue sailor suit, stopped shyly on the landing and stood looking at the company below. Little Miss Impetuosity in the white dress had a mop of black curls, and the round, rosy face of a true Irish lass. Betty leaned against the newel post for support. "Is this our baby? This great big girl?" she gasped, and tried to catch Nanno as she darted by. As easy to catch a sunbeam! It was straight for Cecily that she flew.

"Gently, darling! Be careful of that dress! It mustn't be rumpled for to-morrow!" said Carol. "Anne, dear, come down too! I want to introduce both my little flower girls!" Smiling she beckoned to the child on the landing, who came tripping down with a pretty air of demureness, while Carol called Nanno to greet the returned traveler. "Come, Nanno, turn around, and say 'how do you do' to Miss Betty. You were a mite of a girlie when she saw you last." She turned her about, put back the tumbled curls from the roguish face, and presented the Silver Sword baby, with the blue,

Irish eyes, and Anne Rossiter, a lovely little creature, with long, golden ringlets.

“Dear me, Nanno, I should never dream you were the tot that I used to pull around in a little go-cart!” cried Betty. “How old are you now?”

“Ten,” replied Nanno.

“And I ’m eleven!” said Anne.

“This is my wedding dress!” Nanno explained, smoothing out her finery.

“Your *wedding* dress!” Betty exclaimed. “Are *you* going to be married to-morrow?”

“You ’d think so, to hear her talk about it,” said Carol, laughing. “The most important thing about the wedding is that she and Anne are to be flower girls! I play a purely secondary part. We were just trying on Nanno’s ‘wedding dress’ when you arrived.”

“Miss Carolie made it for me!” said Nanno. “Isn’t it handsome? See the ruffles, and all those little tiny tucks! And it’s embroidered all around *there*—look! And aren’t the blue ribbons just lovely?”

“And wasn’t Miss Carolie just lovely to make you such a beautiful wedding dress!” exclaimed Betty.

“I ’m afraid Nanno’s turning into a little Miss Vanity. It’s well we don’t have weddings very often around here!” said Carol, as the

company praised the dainty frock to the contentment of its wearer's heart.

"My dress is just like hers," said Anne, "and we have hats just alike, too—big white hats, trimmed with forget-me-nots! And we have baskets just alike for our flowers,—white baskets, with blue ribbons!"

"Come up and we'll show them to you," urged Nanno.

"We'll allow our company to lay aside their own hats, first," said Carol, and she took the girls upstairs. Mrs. Armstrong met them in the upper hall. Her face showed lines of care, but she was the same sweet, gracious hostess as before; and she and her daughter led the guests to the very rooms which they had occupied three years ago.

"Miss Betty, did you bring Miss Carolie a wedding present?" inquired Nanno, who had attached herself to the rosy-cheeked young lady from across the sea.

"Nanno! Sh-sh! We don't ask such questions!" Carol admonished her, laughing.

"Yes, Nanno, I have a present for her in my bag!" answered Betty. "I bought it in Berlin, Carol, in a shop where they had antiques,—I know you love the old times so." She opened her suit-case and brought out a small silver dish of ancient workmanship, ready for modern bon-bons.

Nanno could not understand Carol's raptures over it. The flower girls privately agreed that the dessert plates painted by Miss Cecily, with a different design on each,—sweet-briar, honeysuckles, clovers, daisies, violets, and apple-blossoms,—made a far more desirable gift than either the uninteresting antique, or Miss Jean's silver spoons.

"Cecily says Douglas has been in Scotland this summer, and gets home to-night!" said Betty, as her Queen helped her to lay aside her things.

"Yes, and just think of it! I have n't seen my brother since the Christmas vacation nine months ago!"

"Nearly a year! Dear me, Jean, you won't know each other! How did that happen?"

"Why, of course, with both of us at college, we never meet except at vacation time," answered Jean. "And last Easter I was visiting Cecily, and the day after the Yale Commencement Douglas sailed, and we just missed seeing each other. And—oh, Betsey! I'm so afraid the *Campania*'s been delayed in all the fog we've been having lately, and that he won't get in till to-morrow. He tried to get a berth on an earlier steamer, but could n't, and my nightmare is that he'll be fifteen hours late and *just* miss the wedding! Would n't it be heart-breaking! He's to be one of the ushers!"

"What a horrible nightmare!" exclaimed Betty. "Don't think about it, Jean. It would be too awful not to have the Archon here!"

"Well, I won't take out my pocket handkerchief quite so early," said Jean. "Come and see the wedding presents, girls."

In an adjoining room the gifts were on exhibition. The display was a rich one, telling of the love of many friends, and Betty's bon-bon dish was given an honored place among the presents from the battle maids. When the treasures had all been duly admired, and also the hats and baskets of the little flower girls, luncheon was ready. Downstairs they met the bride's father, a courtly gentleman, white-haired before his time, and Alan Armstrong, who had just come in after a morning of errands for his sister.

Early in the afternoon the best man, Jack, arrived with the two remaining bridesmaids, Rose and Stella; and a little later Hamlet's welcoming bark, and a rap-rap-rap of the ancient door-knocker, announced another arrival. The girls saw Carol's face light up, and a pretty rosy flush rise in her cheeks. She laid down the wedding gift that she was unwrapping, and hastened downstairs.

"Court's come!" said Jean, with a knowing smile.

Nanno considered that the flower girls had an

equal right to receive the bridegroom, and Court and Carol, standing together in the hall, saw Mavourneen and the little lady from the South coming down the broad staircase, with their arms around each other. The next minute the bridesmaids upstairs heard a whoop of delight, for Court said, "Sweets to the sweet!" and presented the two little lassies each with a large box of candy.

"Now we've each got a wedding present, too!" cried Nanno, dimpling with bliss. But Carol looked in laughing dismay at the alarming dimensions of the boxes.

"Court! Do you wish to deprive me of both my flower girls?" she exclaimed. "Girlies, was n't it kind of Mr. Hamilton to play Santa Claus like this! But you'll be good now, won't you, and save up most of the candy till after the wedding?"

"Mind, now, Puggy," said Court. "Take just *one* little piece for yourself, and *one* little piece for Anne, and then—steal away quietly!" he added, in a stage whisper, bending close to Nanno's ear.

The heroine of the fawn and sugar-bowl episode giggled ecstatically, but Carol said: "Court, you're a baleful influence for the young! It's well you and Nanno are to be on separate continents for a while. Now take care, Flower Girls; if you burrow too deep into

that candy to-day, I 'll steal your boxes away quietly, and lock them up till the wedding 's safely over!"

Just then the maid of honor came down on an errand for Mrs. Armstrong.

"Jean, may I have the pleasure of becoming your brother-in-law to-morrow?" asked Court as they shook hands.

"Indeed, you may," she answered. "But I wish I could keep you from having the pleasure of carrying my Big Sister way down to South America!"

"Come along, too," he suggested. "It 's your old home! Cut College for the winter, and teach the principles of *Caritas et Veritas* to the dagoes down in Buenos Aires!"

"Don't tempt me. I must peg away at Vas-sar till I 've won my A. B.," said Jean. "But I 'll never forgive you for running so far away with Carol."

"Don't be so hard-hearted, Sister Jean!" he pleaded. "I 'm getting pitched into on all sides!"

But Jean would not relent. And later she had a quarrel to pick with the evening paper for bringing her doleful news. The Campania was reported by wireless to have been delayed by heavy fogs, so that she could not arrive till some time next day.

"Oh, dear, oh dear! My nightmare's coming true!" sighed Jean.

"Don't be a pessimist, Queenie. The Alruna prophesies that he'll arrive to-morrow morning before she's had time to put on her veil," said Carol, but she confessed to herself that she was likely to turn out a false prophetess this time.

However, the disappointing news was not allowed to cast a shadow on the brightness of the evening. At dinner, the center of the table was graced by a huge, old-fashioned bride cake, elaborately frosted,—Veronica's own fruit cake, if you please! Anne and Nanno, who had been enjoying a private tea-party together, took their places with the others at dessert, and every one present cut a slice in turn. For the amusement of the two youngest members of the company, Carol had hidden in the cake a ring, a "wheel of fortune," a penny, and a thimble,—that it might be learned which of the wedding party would be the next to be married, which would have good luck, which would be wealthy, and which doomed to remain single.

Anne discovered her slice of cake to be rich in something besides fruit and spices. With a cry of rapture she drew out of it the emblem of matrimony,—a turquoise ring which Carol had worn when she was a little girl.

"Congratulations, Anne!" cried Eric.

“You’re the next bride! But don’t forget, now,—when you’re married you must obey!”

“Look out for yourself, Eric. *Somebody*’ll be a young lady before you know it!” said Alan.

Eric found in his slice a small clock wheel, prophetic of fortune, and Howard insisted that it belonged to the mechanism of the *separator*.

Stella won the bright, new penny. “I don’t need to study to be a kindergarten teacher, now!” laughed she. “I’m going to marry a billionaire!”

Howard found himself the possessor of the spinster’s thimble. “Here, Nanno, I’ll give it to you,” said he. “No danger *you*’ll be an old maid, and *I* certainly sha’n’t!” And, beaming and undaunted, Mavourneen accepted the badge of spinsterhood.

It was long after the little flower girls were in bed and asleep that Jean stood by the window, looking out into the night, and thinking of a ship all too slowly covering the distance that lay between it and the inner harbor. Here, far inland, the night was clear and star-lit, but down by the bay and out at sea, no doubt the fog still hung heavy.

“I won’t give up hope,” Jean said to herself, which meant that she had already dispensed with that commodity, and was convinced that tomorrow a substitute usher would have to take the Archon’s place.

CHAPTER XXII

MORE TREASURE TROVE

“**C**LEAR as a bell” dawned the bridal day. Bright and early Wyndgarth was astir, that all things might be ready before high noon, the marriage hour. The seven bridesmaids had claimed as their right the privilege of decorating the rooms for the reception, and Carol’s three brothers and her brother-in-law-to-be had in their turn claimed the honor of assisting the bridesmaids. Behold, then, Alan and fair St. Cecilia, Howard and rosy-cheeked Betty, putting the finishing touches to the artistic bower of green beneath which the bridal pair were to stand. Behold Frances, her arms full of yellow chrysanthemums, ordering the “best man” about,—for she and Jack had chosen as their work the beautifying of the hall. See Rose and Stella laying out the little white boxes of wedding cake. And watch Eric, in the dining-room, directed by Jean and Hilda, wreathing the portraits of Grandmother Veronica and her Major. When these have departed to lend a

hand in hall or parlor, the bride and groom slip in, carrying the ruddy, autumnal vines which Court had found that morning while the meadows were thick with dew. They twine them about the mantel, and then linger for a moment by the fireside, listening to the chimney-harp, which is playing sweet music to-day.

The bride had received strict commands to repose in her room till it was time to be robed for the wedding; but the bride, being *Carol*, coolly disregarded all rules and flitted hither and yon, as industrious as any of her bridesmaids. She ran to welcome the fairy godmother, who presently arrived by an early train, and insisted on hovering over her till the old lady was comfortably resting from her journey. Soon afterwards she was discovered curling the hair of her little flower girls; and finally her clear voice was heard calling over the stairs for her bridesmaids to come to her at once; evidently she had still another ceremony to perform.

The seven obeyed her summons and stood before her all in a smiling row. "Girls, this is the crowning of my happiness," she said, "that I may have so many of you whom I love close around me at this time. Now here I have some little keepsakes for you, and you must wear them for me to-day." She took from the table beside her seven tiny white boxes, and divided them among her seven bridesmaids. Opening

them they found each a bar of gold, and, set in the center, a pearl of rare beauty. From every girl there was an exclamation of surprise and delight.

“Carol, how exquisite!”

“How lovely! I never saw pearls so large and so beautiful!”

“Oh, how white and pure they are! But they seem just meant for the bride herself!”

“A bride did wear them once,” said the giver. “My own dear grandmother wore them on her wedding day,—more than fifty years ago. They were set in a brooch together, just seven of them—just enough to go around! My bridesmaids are *my* seven pearls!” The pearls had descended to Carol, and she had prized the brooch as an almost sacred treasure, telling herself that if *she* should ever be a bride she would wear it on her wedding day. But, after all, she had chosen to have the pearls reset; for she felt that it would bring her far greater pleasure to see them worn by those she loved.

It was nearly time for the seven to array themselves for the wedding, and while six of them flew off to make sure that, downstairs, nothing had been forgotten, the maid of honor hastened away to dress, so that she might be ready to help Carol to put on the bridal white. As might have been expected, it was Carol who first dressed the maid of honor, for she was de-

terminated that Jean should look her loveliest that day.

In the costumes that she had planned for her attendant maidens lay a pretty hint of Colonial days. "Major Armstrong and his bride were married in September, too," she had said, "and mine must be a quiet, country wedding, just as theirs was, with a little flavor of the eighteenth century out of compliment to their memories, and to match the dear old homestead."

"Now, my fair Veronica," said she, when Jean was ready, "come to my long glass and see if you 're not the sweetest maid of honor that any bride ever had!" She led Jean to her own room to survey herself, and it was no wonder that Carol felt a loving, sisterly pride.

Jean made a picture both quaint and charming. Her simple gown was of pale blue. Folded about her shoulders was a lace fichu, and where it was crossed on her breast was clasped the gold bar with its pearl. And she was looking out from under a white picture-hat, faced with blue satin and tied with blue ribbons under her chin—an exact copy of the one in Veronica Chauncey's portrait.

"Now, Big Sister, it 's my turn to dress *you*," said the maid of honor.

"Yes, and I must call Mother to help us," answered Carol. "And Aggie, too—I promised her, dear old soul!" Yet still she stood gazing

at the girl whose life had been linked so close to hers, and a great tenderness shone in her face. At last she spoke. "Little Sister, if I try to tell you how dearly I love you, and what it has meant to me to have you for my sister all this time, I'm afraid some drops of rain will fall on my wedding day. I can only trust myself to say one word. This is the wish that I wish this morning: that the same happiness which has come to me may come to *you*, and that I may be with my Little Sister on the day when *she* is a bride."

Then Carol took her into her arms, and they held each other close. "If I try to tell you what having *you* has meant to me, there *will* be rain!" Jean whispered.

But no showers descended that morning. Instead, both girls started suddenly and turned to the window, for a salute from Hamlet told them that some wedding guest was thus early arriving. A carriage was coming up the driveway, and from it a young man was looking out.

"It's Douglas!" they exclaimed with one voice.

"He's come! He's come!" cried Jean, and she would have rushed from the room and down stairs to meet her "brother," but Carol, laughing, held her back.

"Stop! stop! you headlong child! I won't let my maid of honor open the door. But I know

what we 'll do!" A hasty consultation; then the maid of honor, gathering up her skirts, flew down the back stairs, while Carol called over the banister to Nanno and Anne to be ready to let the traveler in.

Douglas Gordon, just returned from Bonnie Scotland, found the door opened for him by a dimpling, wee witch of a portress with arch blue eyes.

"Why! hello, Nanno! How are you!"

"Mr. Douglas!"

As he bent down for a kiss Mavourneen raised herself on tiptoe, clasped him round the neck, and hugged him tight. He swung her off her tiptoes and held her up laughing. "Well, Puggy, you 're an armful now! Such a great big girl! I can hardly lift you!" With Nanno still throttling him he stepped across the threshold, and as he set her down he discovered, hiding behind the door, a little fairy with golden hair.

"Who 's *this* young lady?" he asked. "Nanno, you 'll have to introduce me!"

But Golden Hair introduced herself. "I 'm Anne Rossiter," said she, with a shy smile.

"My little friend, Anne Rossiter! You don't mean it! Well, *this* is a jolly old home-coming!" The fairy's dot of a hand lost itself in the clasp of his. "You don't mean to say you 're the little girl I met on the train that

time? I can't believe it! Why, you're pretty nearly a grown-up young lady!"

"I'm going to Hazelhurst Hall this year," she answered proudly.

"Going to Hazelhurst! Good!" exclaimed Douglas. "We'll see a lot of you! And you've come to Miss Carol's wedding, haven't you? You and she are great chums, I hear."

"Anne and I are the flower girls!" put in Nanno.

"Flower girls! My!" Douglas looked suitably impressed. "Well, you look as pretty as two roses, yourselves! You're two American beauties, aren't you? Dear me, Nanno, you've shot up in the air, too!" he added, surveying them standing side by side. "You'll be brushing the ceiling with your curls, next!"

"I'm going to be married very soon," replied Mavourneen, her head on one side. "And so's Anne,—she got the ring in the cake!"

"Going to be married, are you? Who are the lucky fellows?" began Douglas. But he had no time to learn what youthful swains they had selected, for just then there was a light step on the stairs, and looking up he saw a graceful figure in a flowing, white morning-gown. The bride herself was descending to welcome him.

"Here I am, Carol, after all!" he cried. A moment more and her hand was in his.

“Oh, Douglas, I ’m so glad! We ’d given up all hope!”

“So had I, pretty nearly. It was the fog that delayed us so, but it lifted suddenly and we got in at half past eight this morning. They let me off easy at the custom house, and I did n’t stop at home ten minutes. I was n’t going to be late for the wedding!”

“The ceremony could n’t have taken place without you, Douglas!” the bride declared. “I told Court yesterday that we simply could not be married without the Archon present, to say ‘Bless you, my children!’ ”

“Of course! It would n’t have been right at all!” Douglas heartily agreed. “If I ’d found I was going to be too late, I ’d have forbidden the banns by wireless! May I be allowed to brush up, please, so I ’ll look respectable when I give my blessing?”

“You shall brush up directly, and so must I, or the wedding-march will begin before I have my veil on,” said Carol. “I ’ve broken all the laws of etiquette by flying down to meet you like this. The bride is supposed to be kept a close prisoner up to the last moment, but I would n’t allow anyone but myself to receive the Archon! Now, before I hand you over to Alan’s care, I ’m going to give you the privilege of doing me a favor.”

“That ’s good!” responded Douglas with

alacrity. "I haven't had that privilege for a year! What can I do for you?"

"You remember the secret room?"

"I'll never forget it, nor the old captain's locker!"

"Well, then, you may take out the secret panel for me. There's something inside that I need for my wedding."

"The bride keeps all her jewels there, I suppose," said Douglas.

"My favorite jewel is in there," she answered, "my *best* one! But before we go for it, do step into the library and speak to Father. He'll be *so* glad to see you!" Carol led him to the library.

"Where's Jean?" he asked on the way.

"She's around somewhere," replied Carol. "You'll see her presently. She's been staying with me for several days. She was in the depths of woe about the Campania."

When Douglas had exchanged a cordial greeting with Mr. Armstrong, they passed into the dining-room, the children dancing on ahead. To Nanno the secret room had an unfailing fascination, and yesterday Anne had been initiated into that region of enchantment, and she was eager to repeat her visit to the place where Major Armstrong had been hidden.

Carol opened the mahogany doors of the china closet. Then she stepped back and al-

lowed Douglas to enter. He knelt down, knife in hand, to slip the bolt. "You don't seem to be much afraid of burglars," he remarked. "This panel is n't bolted at all! It's not in tight."

"Why, it was bolted last night!" said Carol.

Douglas lifted out the panel, and fell back in the shock of his surprise. For he found himself looking into the face of—no robber—but a fair lady! Just inside the entrance, seated on the old captain's locker, was a lovely Colonial dame in a pale blue gown, and from under her white picture-hat she smiled serenely at his amazement! Douglas recovered his voice in an instant, and his merry laugh and the little girls' screams of wonder and delight rang out together.

"Buried treasure!" he cried. "Jean, you're the jewel Carol's after! You're a treasure, and no mistake!"

Then Jean's laughter rippled joyously. She sprang from the locker. Douglas, too, started to his feet, and catching both her hands led her forth.

"This is Veronica Chauncey, if you please!" said she, and swept him a curtsy.

"Why, so you are!" he exclaimed. "Veronica herself!"

"I'm to have *seven* fair Veronicas for my bridesmaids," said Carol, well pleased with the success of her trick.

“Miss Jeanie was hiding! Miss Jeanie was hiding!” sang Nanno, hopping up and down in an ecstasy. Suddenly she stopped, overpowered with admiration. “Oh, my! Miss Jeanie! Isn’t your dress handsome! Mr. Douglas, isn’t she just *beau-tiful*!”

“I should say she was!” Douglas answered heartily. “Perfectly *be-yoo-oo-tiful*!” And though he mimicked Mavourneen, his face and voice proved his sincerity. “Let ’s have a good look at you, Jean! I didn’t think I’d been away such an awfully long time, but you—why, you’ve changed so, I hardly recognize you!”

“You mean to imply that I’ve grown wrinkled and faded! Thank you, sir!” said she, and drew herself up with a haughtiness that should have overawed him quite.

“Wrinkled and faded! Not much!” laughed he, and looked at her long and wonderingly. It was hard to realize that this was in very truth the little sister whom he had last seen at Christmas, nearly a year ago. Here stood a bewitching lady about whom was the glamour of the romantic olden time. Her blue eyes sparkled and flashed with mirth, and her lips smiled him a welcome. That smile and those deep, clear eyes—he knew them well,—but there was a rosy glow in my lady’s cheeks that he did not remember seeing in Sister Jean’s. That bright face, so familiar,—something had given it a new

charm. Was it all because he saw it under a picture-hat, and because the dark brown hair made for it so soft a frame? Or was there really some lovely transformation stealing over the girl, with the coming of her nineteen years?

Douglas could not give the answer; but when he had surveyed her, he drew a long breath. "Well, if the real Veronica looked half as bonnie as my little sister, I don't wonder Major Armstrong came back again!"

The new Veronica laughed, growing rosier still. "I wonder if Major Armstrong knew how to pay such fine compliments!" said she. "Did you learn how in Scotland, or have you been to Ireland on the sly? Now, I'm going to have a good look at *you*. Dear me, how sunburned you are! And I believe you're taller than ever. I'm sure your shoulders are broader! I wonder if the Major was as tall and brown as my big brother! You're a braw Scotchman, Douglas Gordon!"

Douglas and Jean being now quits, the traveler told again how the Campania had been delayed, and against what obstacles he had struggled to reach Wyndgarth in time.

"I was in despair about you," said Jean. "And then, just now we heard Hamlet barking, and we looked out, and there you were coming up the drive! So Carol told me to hide in the secret room. And, dear me! what a long time

you took to find me! I was quite tired out, holding up the panel."

"I took him in to see Father first," said Carol, "to give you plenty of time to hide. Now the bride has her favorite jewel, so she must prepare for her wedding."

Turning back to the hall they heard the voice of the bride's mother: "Carol, dear! Where *are* you? Come up and dress immediately!"

Then Miss Van Courtlandt herself looked over the banister. "Carol, you naughty child, come upstairs this minute!" she called. "If you're not dressed in time for your wedding, Court will have to marry the maid of honor!"

"No, no, no, he sha'n't! Court's a piece of property that I won't give up even to Jean!" Upstairs hurried the bride, and the maid of honor and the flower girls followed, leaving Douglas to the hospitality of Alan and Eric.

The bridesmaids had demanded to be present at the veiling of the bride, and when she was ready in her wedding dress they drew around her, all in their picturesque costumes, and watched the ceremony performed by her mother and Jean.

"This Alruna was a true prophetess, after all," said Carol. "The Archon appeared before she had time to put on her veil."

At high noon the pretty stone church in the village was thronged. Among the guests were

the eight battle maids who had arrived that morning, and a number of Carol's own Hazelhurst classmates, besides Miss Carlton herself. The girls had noticed, as they entered, several rows of eager children. Carol had begged a half holiday for the little people of her Guild, that they might be present at her marriage; and here they were, all in their best, watched over by their teacher. There, too, were Aggie and Andrew, whom Eric had led to a fine post of vantage from which to see the bride.

And now there was no more passing up and down the aisles, but only a gentle flutter of expectancy, and the rolling out of festal music from the organ.

"Now they 're coming!" whispered Phyllis to Evelyn, as the first notes of Wagner's famous Wedding March swelled forth. In a flash every one was standing, looking toward the central aisle. Yes, the procession was advancing. First the ushers; Carol's brothers, two cousins of the groom, and Douglas, who had so nearly come too late. Six bridesmaids followed, each with her bouquet of pale pink roses, and each gowned in white, a quaint, lace fichu folded across her chest, and on her head an old-time picture hat, tied with blue ribbons. Two and two they walked: first Betty and Hilda, then Frances and Stella, then Cecily and Rose Hamilton. After them came Jean, the

maid of honor, in pale blue, with her roses of creamy yellow; then, carrying their baskets of posies before the bride, two winsome flower girls in white, with blue ribbons, and wearing broad-brimmed hats with wreaths of forget-me-nots. Anne of the golden ringlets, and Mavourneen of the long, dark curls, felt themselves the observed of all observers, and so careful were they not to drop a single flower that neither had a glance to spare for the smiling maidens of the Order, nor the admiring little members of the Guild.

Last and loveliest of all, the bride herself passed up the aisle on her father's arm. No wonder that the eyes of old and young alike rested upon her tenderly. No wonder that the battle maids leaned toward her with loving eagerness, and that the gray-haired serving man and wife murmured, "God bless her!" The girl who had won her way to so many hearts was very beautiful in her bridal hour.

But to the rows of children pressing toward the aisle, climbing on the kneeling-benches, and craning their necks to see, the bride was a vision too wonderful for earth. The good fairy of Wyndgarth, to whom they owed so many happy days, was a dazzling being, robed in pure white silk; and from her bright hair down to her white satin slippers she was covered with a shimmering cloud of a veil, through which they yet could

see the face they knew and loved. She carried white roses and lilies-of-the-valley; there were white blossoms on her head, and as she passed they saw the sweep of her silken train. The most restless mischiefs of them all held their breath with awe and delight, but when the vision had moved on to meet the waiting bridegroom the whisper spread throughout the little band, "She saw us, and she smiled!"

And now the bridal procession ascends the steps to the flower-decked chancel, where the rector waits to unite the man and maid. And now the father gives his daughter away into another's keeping, and Court and Carol each to the other plight their troth.

It is over. On the young wife's finger is the golden marriage circlet. Triumphal music peals forth once more. Down from the chancel, down the aisle, her train of joyous maidens following, comes Carol on her husband's arm.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RING AND THE PROMISE

A WAY from the church and back again to Wyndgarth. There a reception was held, all the more delightful because formality was thrown to the winds and joy reigned supreme. The old mansion had seen many a daughter of the house go forth as a bride, but never had one received warmer praises than did the happy girl standing in a bower of green, with Court Hamilton by her side. The drawing-room was flooded with guests pressing up to offer their congratulations, and among the first was the white-haired fairy godmother. Carol and Court both stepped forth to receive her.

“The most wonderful fairy godmother that ever was known!” said Carol, bending to kiss the dear old face. “Always conjuring up the most beautiful surprises with a wave of her wand! Now remember, when we come back from South America you’re to come and stay with us and watch us ‘living happily ever after’!”

“Oh, I’ll drop in on you now and again, and

see if a child like you knows anything about housekeeping," replied Miss Van Courtlandt. "But I won't promise to *stay* very long,—two is company, three is a crowd, you know, especially around honeymoon time!"

"Three is *never* a crowd, when the third is a fairy godmother!" declared the bride. "You are coming to stay with us, dearie—you *must*! Now you know, when the Alruna says 'you must,' even fairy godmothers have to obey!"

"You can't help yourself, Auntie—she'll make you obey her. She makes *me*!" said Court. With merry gallantry he placed the little dame in the arm-chair awaiting her, near the bower.

Well might Carol call the fairy godmother the most wonderful ever known! More than one delightful surprise had been prepared by Miss Van Courtlandt as September drew near, and on this, his marriage day, she had given her grandnephew the "legacy" ahead of time and called it "a wedding gift."

The bridesmaids were gathered near the bower. "Now, Sister Jean, won't you forgive me at last?" said the bridegroom.

"Oh, dear! I suppose I'll have to, Brother Court!" Jean answered. "I don't want to, one bit; but you both of you look so happy, I simply can't frown any longer!"

"What fun it is to catch bits of conversa-

tion!" said Hilda to Betty. "I wish I could count the number of times I've heard, 'She's the most beautiful bride I've ever seen!'"

"We're getting our share of compliments, too," replied Betty. "I heard a girl saying, just now, that she was going to have *her* bridesmaids wear eighteenth century hats and Marie Antoinette fichus, when she had her wedding! We're setting the fashion!"

"Did you ever in your life see two people look so radiantly happy!" laughed Rose, with a glance at her older brother and her new sister-in-law.

"Court went through it like a man!" remarked Jack. "And didn't I do my stunt with *éclat*?" he inquired of Frances.

"No, Jack, you were pale and shaky!" Frances made answer. "You were thinking that some dreadful time you might have to go through with it yourself!"

Mr. Armstrong, meanwhile, was saying to Cecily, "We shall have seven more weddings before long, with so many charming bridesmaids!"

"Where's Jean flown to?" asked Evelyn, on her way to congratulate the bride and groom. "I haven't had a chance to tell her what a pretty maid of honor she makes."

"She went off on some errand for Carol, I think," answered Stella.

A moment later they saw Jean threading her way through the stream of guests. She had something in her hand. "Carol sent me upstairs to bring her down the signet ring," she explained to her cousin. "She had to leave it at home, so Court could slip the wedding ring on her finger. But now she wants it again. I'm sure she won't mind if I tell you what she told the members of the League. The day they were engaged she promised Court to wear the signet till he should put the wedding ring in its place."

"What a pretty idea!" exclaimed Evelyn, as Jean passed on to the bower. "It's really a League engagement ring! I wonder whether she'll continue to wear it, or give it back to the Queen."

"As she has a regular engagement ring too, I think it ought to come back to Jean," said Betty.

Soon after the bride's property had been restored to her, Douglas came up to greet "Mrs. Hamilton." Then from her finger where now shone the wedding ring, Carol drew the amethyst signet. "Here's a keepsake for you, most worthy Archon," said she, and placed it in his hand. Merry sunbeams were at play in her eyes as she added, "But don't keep it forever. Some day *you* must give it away."

"Give it away! I couldn't think of it!"

Douglas protested. "A keepsake from the bride! It's entirely too valuable!"

"Oh, but you *must*, or I take it back again," said Carol. "*Some* day, Douglas, you must give it away. Only, be sure you choose the *right* person to wear the signet ring!"

"Yes,—I will—some day! I promise," he answered, smiling. "That is, unless the *right* person refuses to wear it for me."

"If she does," returned Carol, "send her to the Alruna."

"A first-rate idea! I will!"

"And if she consents," said the bride, "you must both of you come to the Alruna for a blessing."

"We'll come," he promised. They shook hands upon it. "I'll guard the signet faithfully," said he.

Absorbed as they were in chatting with the guests, none of the bridesmaids,—not even Jean,—noticed the giving away of the famous ring; nor did Douglas betray it, as he bestirred himself, like his brother ushers, in helping to serve the ladies with the delicacies provided for the wedding breakfast. Eric assumed the congenial duty of feasting the little flower girls.

"I wish there was a wedding *every* day!" sighed Nanno, enjoying the sweet frostiness of her *biscuit tortoni*.

"So do I!" said Anne, fervently. "I'm go-

ing to have my wedding dress made just like Miss Carol's," she informed Eric. "And Nanno's going to be my maid of honor, and dress in blue, just like Miss Jean. And you can be an usher, if you like!"

"Oh, come now, Anne! Can't you do better for me than that?" Eric complained. "I think, after I've hooked a second help of ice cream for you, you might let me be the *groom*!"

Music sounded in Wyndgarth that afternoon, with an accompaniment of laughter and mirthful voices, as the guests passed to and fro through the rooms decked with greens and flowers; and all the while, high above the scene of rejoicing, a lone sentinel stood on the staircase landing and spoke ceaselessly in a low monotone. Tick-tock! tick-tock! The ancient hall clock, that had ticked out the coming and going of many a marriage day, was telling off the fleeting moments. Swiftly the minute hand traveled around the great silvery face; slowly, imperceptibly, the hour hand crept; clear and bell-like rang out the chime, calling the bride to come away and make ready to leave her father's home.

"Now don't forget to throw us down your bouquet, so we can see which of your bridesmaids is to be married first!" said Rose; and, as Carol climbed the stairway to prepare for her departure, the seven girls gathered at the

foot, and with upturned faces waited expectant. At the head of the flight Carol turned, and, leaning over the banister, tossed down her bouquet of lilies and roses. Seven laughing candidates all snatched at once for the falling flowers. Cecily's nimble skip almost won her the prize. She touched but failed to grasp it. Jean and Frances caught it together; for as the tall maid of honor raised her arms high, the smallest bridesmaid sprang into the air. Two pairs of hands received the bride's parting gift and held it fast.

"A tie! a tie!" cried Betty. "Carol, you must throw your bouquet over again."

"No, no! We've won it, and we keep it!" the two lucky bridesmaids answered.

"It means we're to be married the same day," said Frances. "We'll have a double wedding!"

It was well that Court and Carol had planned to leave the house long before train time; otherwise they would assuredly have been too late, so many devoted maidens stole upstairs to detain the bride with private farewells. Nanno fettered her with loving arms, and seemed determined to hold her prisoner for the rest of the afternoon.

"Good-by, Sweetheart! Take good care of Mrs. Armstrong and everybody for me!" said Carol, giving the Silver Sword baby a last hug.

"Sure, Oi will!" Mavourneen promised, relapsing into the lingo which Carol thought she had banished forever from the tongue of her small charge.

Then came the parting with the brothers. Then a last sacred moment alone with father and mother. Finally, while a merry crowd stood gathered in the hall, the bride and groom came hurrying down the staircase, Carol in her pretty traveling dress, all ready for her wedding journey. They came down to the good old melody of "*Oats, peas, beans,*" for Alan had given the word to the musicians to play the *Honeymoon March*.

Pressing after the two fugitives, the crowd of young people rushed from the hall out to the porch, their elders following. At sight of her equipage Carol stopped short in surprise, and turning to Miss Van Courtlandt exclaimed, "Fairy Godmother, is this Cinderella's pumpkin coach? I'm sure it's yellow enough!"

Whether the fairy godmother's wand had waved it into existence or not, the carriage in which the bride and groom were to drive away had nearly as much golden yellow about it as Cinderella's celebrated vehicle.

The evening before, Carol had had a laughing battle with Alan, whom she found smuggling in several yards of white ribbon, plainly intended to decorate the bridal chariot. She had con-

fiscated it, and bound him by a solemn promise to affix no white streamers to the carriage to-morrow.

"Yes, I'll be good. Nary a ribbon shall there be!" Alan had vowed; and though Carol had been prepared for *some* brotherly trick, she had not expected to make *quite* so resplendent a show, as she drove through the streets of Talulah.

Now she beheld her carriage covered with festoons of golden-rod, interspersed with purple asters. It looked as if a whole fieldful had been mown down for the purpose. The horses, too, were adorned with plumes of golden-rod and rosettes of chrysanthemums, hastily stolen from the vases in the hall. Andrew was on the box, his wrinkled face beaming, and a monstrous yellow chrysanthemum in his button-hole.

The battle maids closed in around the "pumpkin coach," and fairly mobbed their Alruna till she had kissed each one over again at the carriage door.

"The last kiss for my Little Sister!" said Carol. When it had been given she stepped into her gay chariot; Court took his place by her side, and away they drove, waving their farewells.

"Good-by! Good-by! Good wishes!" called the company on the porch and lawn. And as the daughter of Wyndgarth and the man who

had won her passed out through the old Colonial gateway, the chorus followed them: "Good-by! Good wishes! *Au revoir!*"

The sun was low in the clear sky; a frostiness was creeping into the air. Jean's parents, Mrs. Brook, Dr. and Mrs. Hamilton, and the fairy godmother had all gone. The only guests who still lingered were the members of the League. They had promised Carol to stay over night, that her father and mother might find the evening bright and cheerful.

Jean turned from the rooms that looked so lonely and deserted now, and wandered out across the lawn. Glancing toward the garden she could see, strolling up and down, first Jack and Frances, then Alan and Cecily. They seemed as gay and unwearied as ever; but now that the joyous excitement of the whole busy week, crowned by the wedding itself, was over, Jean realized that she was very tired. The shadows of the maples stretched darkly over the sward, and a heavier shadow stole over the girl's spirit. She could not understand it,—this strange depression at the very time when her heart was rejoicing in Carol's happiness. More than one weary little sigh escaped her, as she looked thoughtfully into the shining west. They were gone—the bridal pair! Gone to spend the first days of their new life among the mountains which they both loved so well. Yes,

it was a new life that Carol was entering,—her loving sister-friend who had been so dear to her for more than four long years! But it was one that Jean felt she could not share. The Little Sister was left alone.

“It can never be the same!” she murmured.

“*What* can never be the same?”

Jean turned at the sound of the familiar voice. Douglas stood beside her. “How softly you came up!” she exclaimed. “And you caught me talking to myself! You’ve brought me my cloak, haven’t you? Thank you, Brother.”

“It’s getting chilly,” said Douglas. “We mustn’t let Veronica catch cold.” He wrapped her heavy, white evening-cloak carefully about her; then proceeded to fasten it at her throat. Jean smiled gratefully. It was very comforting just then to find herself thought of and cared for. But there must have been something plaintive in that little smile, for Douglas asked, “What’s the trouble? You look sad. Are you missing Carol already?”

“I’m beginning to,” she answered.

“Won’t you tell me what it is that ‘can never be the same’? Carol loves you just the same as ever, and always will—if that’s what you’re thinking about.”

“Oh, yes, I’m sure of that!” said Jean. “Carol was dearer than ever when we had our

private good-by. She said I had my own little home deep down in her heart, and nobody else should ever step into my place. But it can never be quite the same again. She does n't *need* me now. She's often told me that she needed me, and that I was a comfort to her. But now she'll have Court and a home of her own,—she won't need me any more."

"Well, there are plenty of us left who *do* need you, Jean!" cried Douglas, with an energy that surprised her. "*I* need you like everything! I could n't get along without my sister! Jean, you've got your old brother, anyway,—are n't brothers *some* good?"

"Indeed they are! Ever and ever so much good!" replied Jean, her face lighting up with a comforted look. "But, Douglas, you'll be running away some day," she added with playful despondency. "You're always talking about going out West. You'll be the next one to desert me!"

"You won't find *me* deserting!" answered Douglas. There was still more intensity in his voice. Steadily he looked into the deep blue eyes, and he spoke with an earnestness that made them fill with wonder. "I'll never go far away from *you* if I can help it. But if I should ever have to for a while, I'll come back to you again. Here's the sign of it. See what I have here." He showed her what he had all

this time concealed—the ring, with the clear purple stone.

Jean's face was bright and glowing now, as he had seen it when he found her in the morning. "The signet!" she exclaimed. "Carol's given it to *you*! But why is it a sign that—you'll come back to me?" For some strange reason she put the question shyly.

"That's a secret between the Alruna and the Archon," Douglas answered, with a smile. "Jean, there's a big secret about this ring. I have no right to tell you yet, but I will—some day. And until I do tell you, I'll carry the signet as a sign that wherever I may go I will come back to you, Jean." He drew the girl's arm protectingly through his, as they strolled down to the gate to gaze at the blushing horizon. And he said to himself, "I've found her already,—the right person to wear the signet ring!"

Yes, Douglas had found the right person: the very one whom Carol had meant him to choose; and sooner, far sooner than he had dared to hope, the happy time came when he did give the ring away!

One day Cecily found the amethyst signet shining on her Queen's finger. Jean blushed a tell-tale, rosy red. "I've promised Douglas to wear it," she said softly, "until he puts—a *wedding ring*—in its place!"





